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# ELLERY QUEEN'S 1971 ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

"Ellery Queen"

DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 229 PARK AVE. SOUTH  
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10003

**FIRST PRINTING**

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## EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Reader:

This is the 20th in *EQMM's* series of original paperback anthologies—a special 20th Anniversary Volume containing, in addition to 11 short stories, no less than 5 short novels, all complete in this book . . .

Talking about a series of books; one series that we remember with affection from our childhood is the sequence of fairy-tale anthologies edited by Andrew Lang (1844-1912), poet, parodist, essayist, folklorist, critic, historian, and translator. There seemed to be an unending continuity of them, and we read every one—at least, every one published in the United States and available on our small-town public-library shelves. Mr. Lang hit upon an inspired title-pattern: he gave each of his anthologies a “color title”—*The Red Fairy Book*, *The Blue Fairy Book*, *The Yellow Fairy Book*, and among others, *Green*, *Pink*, *Brown*, *Orange*, *Grey*, and even *Lilac*. (We have just learned that Dover Publications of New York City has been reissuing the Lang series, beginning with *The Blue Fairy Book*, originally published in 1889.)

Now, what is the relevance of Andrew Lang’s “enchanted rainbow-hued” anthologies to this series of Ellery Queen anthologies? Well, mystery-detective-crime-suspense stories are the fairy tales of our time—some could even be called the Grim Fairy Tales of the 20th Century.

And as Andrew Lang found his connotations in colors, so we use the three “primary color” sources for the short novels, novelets, and short stories in our series. In this 20th Anniversary collection, “red” could be attributed to the stories about such world-famous series-detectives as

Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe  
Michael Innes' Sir John Appleby  
Harry Kemelman's Professor Nicholas Welt  
Eric Ambler's Dr. Jan Czissar  
Lawrence Treat's Homicide Squad  
George Harmon Coxe's Kent Murdock  
Robert L. Fish's Schlock Homes  
Ellery Queen's E.Q.

"Blue" could designate the non-series stories by such dyed-in-detection colorists with words as

Charlotte Armstrong  
Gerald Kersh  
Kelley Roos  
Patrick Quentin

"Yellow" could correspond to stories by such internationally celebrated literary figures as

Jack London  
Ben Hecht  
O. Henry  
Lord Dunsany

And once again, as in the preceding 19 volumes of this series, the three "primary colors" are matched by three editorial hues: every story must have the chromatic purity imbued these past 30 years in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*—(1) vivid quality of writing, and (2) bright originality or radiant craftsmanship in plotting, and (3) none of the 5 short novels and 11 short stories in this 20th Anniversary suspense-spectrum has ever appeared in any of the 58 "color charts" previously paletted by

ELLERY QUEEN

Rex Stout

## The Christmas Party Murder

One of Rex Stout's best short novels about Nero Wolfe, the sedentary beer-and-orchid fancier, and Archie Goodwin, the peripatetic dolls-and-danger fancier—more complex than usual, meatier, and with an accelerating pace that doesn't slow down even at the hairpin turns of the plot...

Archie Goodwin attended the fateful Christmas Party for the most unusual reason imaginable (for Archie, that is); and Nero Wolfe's connection with the fateful Christmas Party was, if possible, even more unusual (for Nero, that is); and the whole absorbing case was a marriage-go-round—with murder riding the gold-leaf horse and Santa Claus in the saddle...

### Detectives: NERO WOLFE and ARCHIE GOODWIN

I'M SORRY, SIR," I SAID. I TRIED to sound sorry. "But I told you two days ago, Monday, that I had a date for Friday afternoon, and you said all right. So I'll drive you to Long Island on Saturday or Sunday."

Nero Wolfe shook his head. "That won't do. Mr. Thompson's ship docks Friday morning, and he will be at Mr. Hewitt's place only until Saturday noon, when he leaves for New Orleans. As you know, he is the best hybridizer in England, and I am grateful to Mr. Hewitt for inviting me to spend a few hours with him. As I remember, the drive

takes about an hour and a half; we should leave at twelve thirty."

I decided to count ten, and swiveled my chair, facing my desk, so as to have privacy for it. As usual when we have no important case going, we had been getting on each other's nerves for a week, and I admit I was a little touchy, but his taking it for granted like that was a little too much.

When I had finished the count, I turned my head to where he was perched on his throne behind his desk, and darned if he hadn't gone back to his book, making it plain that he regarded it as

settled. That was much too much. I swiveled my chair to confront him.

"I really am sorry," I said, not trying to sound sorry, "but I have to keep that date Friday afternoon. It's a Christmas party at the office of Kurt Bottweill—you remember him, we did a job for him a few months ago, the stolen tapestries. You may not remember Margot Dickey, but I do. I have been seeing her some, and I promised her I'd go to the party. We never have a Christmas office party here. As for going to Long Island, your idea that a car is a death trap if I'm not driving it is unsound. You can take a taxi, or hire a Baxter man, or get Saul Panzer to drive you."

Wolfe had lowered his book. "I hope to get some useful information from Mr. Thompson, and you will take notes."

"Not if I'm not there. Hewitt's secretary knows orchid terms as well as I do. So do you."

I admit those last three words were a bit strong, but he shouldn't have gone back to his book.

Wolfe's lips tightened. "Archie. How many times in the past year have I asked you to drive me somewhere?"

"If you call it asking, maybe eighteen or twenty."

"Not excessive, surely. If my feeling that you alone are to be trusted at the wheel of a car is an aberration, I have it. We will

leave for Mr. Hewitt's place Friday at twelve thirty."

So there we were. I took a breath, but I didn't need to count ten again. If he was to be taught a lesson, and he certainly needed one, luckily I had in my possession a document that would make it good. Reaching to my inside breast pocket, I took out a folded sheet of paper.

"I didn't intend," I told him, "to spring this on you until tomorrow, or maybe even later, but I guess it will have to be now. Just as well, I suppose."

I left my chair, unfolded the paper, and handed it to him. He put his book down to take it, gave it a look, shot a glance at me, looked at the paper again, and let it drop on his desk.

He snorted. "Pfui. What flummery is this?"

"No flummery. As you see, it's a marriage license for Archie Goodwin and Margot Dickey. It cost me two bucks. I could be mushy about it, but I won't. I will only say that if I am hooked at last, it took an expert. She intends to spread the tidings at the Christmas office party, and of course I have to be there. When you announce you have caught a fish it helps to have the fish present in person. Frankly, I would prefer to drive you to Long Island, but it can't be done."

The effect was all I could have asked. He gazed at me through

narrowed eyes long enough to count eleven, then picked up the document and gazed at it. He flicked it to the edge of the desk as if it were crawling with germs, and focused on me again.

"You are deranged," he said evenly and distinctly. "Sit down."

I nodded. "I suppose," I agreed, remaining upright, "it's a form of madness, but so what if I've got it? Like what Margot was reading to me the other night—some poet, I think it was some Greek—"O love, resistless in thy might, thou triumphest even—"

"Shut up and sit down!"

"Yes, sir." I didn't move. "But we're not rushing it. We haven't set the date, and there'll be plenty of time to decide on adjustments. You may not want me here any more, but that's up to you. As far as I'm concerned, I would like to stay. My long association with you has had its flaws, but I would hate to end it. The pay is okay, especially if I get a raise the first of the year, which is a week from Monday. I have grown to regard this old brownstone as my home, although you own it and although there are two creaky boards in the floor of my room. I appreciate working for the greatest private detective in the world, no matter how eccentric he is. I appreciate being able to go up to the plant rooms whenever I feel like it and look

at ten thousand orchids, especially the odontoglossums. I fully appreciate—"

"Sit down!"

"I'm too worked up to sit. I fully appreciate Fritz's cooking. I like the billiard table in the basement. I like West Thirty-fifth Street. I like the one-way glass panel in the front door. I like this rug I'm standing on. I like your favorite color, yellow. I have told Margot all this, and more, including the fact that you are allergic to women. We have discussed it, and we think it may be worth trying, say for a month, when we get back from the honeymoon. My room could be our bedroom, and the other room on that floor could be our living room. There are plenty of closets. We could eat with you, as I have been, or we could eat up there, as you prefer. If the trial works out, new furniture or redecorating would be up to us. She will keep her job with Kurt Bottweil, so she wouldn't be here during the day, and since he's an interior decorator we would get things wholesale. Of course, we merely suggest this for your consideration. It's your house."

I picked up my marriage license, folded it, and returned it to my pocket.

His eyes had stayed narrow and his lips tight. "I don't believe it," he growled. "What about Miss Rowan?"

"We won't drag Miss Rowan into this," I said stiffly.

"What about the thousands of others you dallied with?"  
"Not thousands. Not even a thousand. I'll have to look up 'dally.' They'll get theirs, as Margot has got hers. As you see, I'm deranged only up to a point. I realize—"

"Sit down."

"No, sir. I know this will have to be discussed, but right now you're stirred up and it would be better to wait for a day or two, or maybe more. By Saturday the idea of a woman in the house may have you boiling even worse than you are now, or it may have cooled you down to a simmer. If the former, no discussion will be needed. If the latter, you may decide it's worth a try. I hope you do."

I turned and walked out.

In the hall I hesitated. I could have gone up to my room and phoned from there, but in his present state it was quite possible he would listen in from his desk, and the call I wanted to make was personal.

So I got my hat and coat from the rack, let myself out, descended the stoop steps, walked to the drug store on Ninth Avenue, found the booth unoccupied, and dialed a number. In a moment a musical little voice—more a chirp than a voice—was in my ear.

"Kurt Bottweill's studio, good morning."

"This is Archie Goodwin, Cherry. May I speak to Margot?"  
"Why, certainly. Just a moment."

It was a fairly long moment. Then another voice. "Archie, darling!"

"Yes, my own. I've got it." "I knew you could!"

"Sure, I can do anything. Not only that, you said up to a hundred bucks, and I thought I would have to part with twenty at least, but it only took five. And not only that, but it's on me, because I've already had my money's worth of fun out of it, and more. I'll tell you about it when I see you. Shall I send it up by messenger?"

"No, I don't think—I'd better come and get it. Where are you?"

"In a phone booth. I'd just as soon not go back to the office right now because Mr. Wolfe wants to be alone to boil, so how about the Tulip Bar at the Churchill in twenty minutes? I feel like buying you a drink."

"I feel like buying you a drink!"

She should, since I was treating her to a marriage license.

When, at three o'clock Friday afternoon, I wriggled out of the taxi at the curb in front of the four-story building in the East Sixties, it was snowing. If it kept

up, New York might have an off-white Christmas.

During the two days that had passed since I got my money's worth from the marriage license, the atmosphere around Wolfe's place had not been very seasonable. If we had had a case going, frequent and sustained communication would have been unavoidable, but without one there was nothing that absolutely had to be said, and we said it.

Our handling of that trying period showed our true natures. At table, for instance, I was polite and reserved, and spoke, when speaking seemed necessary, in low and cultured tones. When Wolfe spoke he either snapped or barked. Neither of us mentioned the state of bliss I was headed for, or the adjustments that would have to be made, or my Friday date with my fiancée, or his trip to Long Island.

But he arranged it somehow, for precisely at twelve thirty on Friday a black limousine drew up in front of the house, and Wolfe, with the brim of his old black hat turned down and the collar of his new gray overcoat turned up for the snow, descended the stoop, stood massively, the mountain of him, on the bottom step until the uniformed chauffeur had opened the door, and crossed the sidewalk and climbed in. I watched it from above, from a window of my room.

I admit I was relieved and felt better. He had unquestionably needed a lesson and I didn't regret giving him one, but if he had passed up a chance for an orchid powwow with the best hybridizer in England I would never have heard the last of it.

I went down to the kitchen and lunch with Fritz, who was so upset by the atmosphere that he forgot to put the lemon juice in the soufflé. I wanted to console him by telling him that everything would be rosy by Christmas, only three days off, but of course that wouldn't do.

I had a notion to toss a coin to decide whether I would have a look at the new exhibit of dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum or go to the Bottweill party, but I was curious to know how Margot was making out with the license, and also how the other Bottweill personnel were making out with each other.

It was surprising that they were still making out at all. Cherry Quon's position in the setup was apparently minor, since she functioned chiefly as a receptionist and phone-answerer, but I had seen her black eyes dart daggers at Margot Dickey, who should have been clear out of her reach. I had gathered that it was Margot who was mainly relied on to wrangle prospective customers into the corral, that Bottweill himself put them under the spell, and that

Alfred Kiernan's part was to make sure that before the spell wore off an order got signed on the dotted line.

Of course that wasn't all. The order had to be filled, and that was handled, under Bottweill's supervision, by Emil Hatch in the workshop. Also funds were required to buy ingredients, and they were furnished by a specimen named Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome. Margot had told me that Mrs. Jerome would be at the party and would bring her son Leo, whom I had never met.

According to Margot, Leo, who had no connection with the Bottweill business or any other business, devoted his time to two important activities: getting enough cash from his mother to keep going as a junior playboy, and stopping the flow of cash to Bottweill, or at least slowing it down.

It was quite a tangle, an interesting exhibit of bipeds alive and kicking, and deciding it promised more entertainment than the dead dinosaurs, I took a taxi to the East Sixties.

The ground floor of the four-story building, formerly a deluxe double-width residence, was now a beauty shop. The second floor was a real estate office. The third floor was Kurt Bottweill's workshop, and on top was his studio.

From the vestibule I took the

do-it-yourself elevator to the top, opened the door, and stepped out into the glossy gold-leaf elegance I had first seen some months back, when Bottweill had hired Wolfe to find out who had swiped some tapestries.

On that first visit I had decided that the only big difference between chrome modern and Bottweill gold-leaf modern was the color, and I still thought so. Not even skin deep; just a two-hundred-thousandth of an inch deep. But on the panels and racks and furniture frames it gave the big skylighted studio quite a tone, and the rugs and drapes and pictures, all modern, joined in. It would have been a fine den for a blind millionaire.

"Archie!" a voice called. "Come and help us sample!"

It was Margot Dickey. In a far corner was a gold-leaf bar, some eight feet long, and she was at it on a gold-leaf stool. Cherry Quon and Alfred Kiernan were with her, also on stools, and behind the bar was Santa Claus, pouring from a champagne bottle.

It was certainly a modern touch to have Santa Claus tend bar, but there was nothing modern about his costume. He was strictly traditional, cut, color, size, mask, and all, except that the hand grasping the champagne bottle wore a white glove. I assumed, crossing to them over the thick rugs, that that was a touch of

Bottweill elegance, and didn't learn until later how wrong I was.

They gave me the season's greetings, and Santa Claus poured a glass of bubbles for me. No gold leaf on the glass. I was glad I had come. To drink champagne with a blonde at one elbow and a brunette at the other gives a man a sense of well-being, and those two were fine specimens—the tall slender Margot relaxed, all curves, on the stool, and little slant-eyes Cherry Quon, who came only up to my collar when standing with her spine as straight as a plumb line, yet not stiff. I thought Cherry worthy of notice not only as a statuette, though she was highly decorative, but as a possible source of new light on human relations. Margot had told me that her father was half Chinese and half Indian—not American Indian—a n d her mother was Dutch.

I said that apparently I had come too early, but Alfred Kiernan said no, the others were around and would be in shortly. He added that it was a pleasant surprise to see me, as it was just a little family gathering and he hadn't known others had been invited.

Kiernan, whose title was business manager, had not liked a certain step I had taken when I was hunting the tapestries, and he still didn't, but an Irishman at a Christmas party likes

everybody. My impression was that he really was pleased, so I was too. Margot said she had invited me, and Kiernan patted her on the arm and said that if she hadn't he would. About my age and fully as handsome, he was the kind who can pat the arm of a queen or a president's wife without making eyebrows go up.

He said we needed another sample and turned to the bartender. "Mr. Claus, we'll try the Veuve Clicquot." To us: "Just like Kurt to provide different brands. No monotony for Kurt." To the bartender: "May I call you by your first name, Santi?"

"Certainly, sir," Santa Claus told him from behind the mask in a thin falsetto that didn't match his size. As he stooped and came up with a bottle, a door at the left opened and two men entered. One of them, Emil Hatch, I had met before. When briefing Wolfe on the tapestries and telling us about his staff, Bottweill had called Margot Dickey his contact woman, Cherry Quon his handy girl and Emil Hatch his pet wizard, and when I met Hatch I found that he both looked the part and acted it. He wasn't much taller than Cherry Quon and skinny, and something had either pushed his left shoulder down or his right shoulder up, making him lopsided, and he had a sour face, a sour voice, a sour taste.

When the stranger was named

to me as Leo Jerome, that placed him. I was acquainted with his mother, Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome. She was a widow, and an angel—that is, Kurt Bottweill's angel. During the investigation she had talked as if the tapestries belonged to her, but that might have only been her manners, of which she had plenty. I could have made guesses about her personal relations with Bottweill, but hadn't bothered. I have enough to do to handle my own personal relations without wasting my brain power on other people's.

As for her son Leo, he must have got his physique from his father—tall, bony, big-eared, and long-armed. He was probably approaching thirty, below Kiernan but above Margot and Cherry.

When he shoved in between Cherry and me, giving me his back, and Emil Hatch had something to tell Kiernan, sour no doubt, I touched Margot's elbow and she slid off the stool and let herself be steered across to a divan which had been covered with designs by Euclid in six or seven colors. We stood looking down at it.

"Mighty pretty," I said, "but nothing like as pretty as you. If only that license were real! I can get a real one for two dollars. What do you say?"

"*You!*" she said scornfully. "You wouldn't marry Miss Universe if she came to you on

her knees with a billion dollars."

"I dare her to try it. Did it work?"

"Perfect. Simply perfect."

"Then you're ditching me?"

"Yes, Archie darling. But I'll be a sister to you."

"I've got a sister. I want the license back for a souvenir, and anyway I don't want it kicking around. I could be hooked for forgery. You can mail it to me, once my own."

"No, I can't. He tore it up."

"The hell he did. Where are the pieces?"

"Gone. He put them in his wastebasket. Will you come to the wedding?"

"What wastebasket where?"

"The gold one by his desk in his office. Last evening after dinner. Will you come to the wedding?"

"I will not. My heart is bleeding. So will Mr. Wolfe's—and by the way, I'd better get out of here. I'm not going to stand around and sulk."

"You won't have to. He won't know I've told you, and anyway, you wouldn't be expected—Here he comes!"

She darted off to the bar and I headed that way. Through the door on the left appeared Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome, all of her, plump and plushy, with folds of mink trying to keep up as she breezed in. As she approached, those on stools left them and got

onto their feet; but that courtesy could have been as much for her companion as for her. She was the angel; but Kurt Bottweill was the boss.

Bottweill stopped five paces short of the bar, extended his arms as far as they would go, and sang out, "Merry Christmas, all my blessings! Merry merry merry!"

I still hadn't labeled him. My first impression, months ago, had been that he was one of them, but that had been wrong. He was a man all right, but the question was what kind. About average in height, round but not pudgy, maybe forty-two or -three, his fine black hair slicked back so that he looked balder than he was, he was nothing great to look at; but he had something, not only for women but for men too. Wolfe had once invited him to stay for dinner, and they had talked about the scrolls from the Dead Sea. I had seen him twice at baseball games. His label would have to wait.

As I joined them at the bar, where Santa Claus was pouring Mumms Cordon Rouge, Bottweill squinted at me a moment and then grinned. "Goodwin! You here? Good! Edith, your pet sleuth!"

Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome, reaching for a glass, stopped her hand to look at me. "Who asked you?" she demanded, then went

on, with no room for a reply, "Cherry, I suppose. Cherry is a blessing. Leo, quit tugging at me. Very well, take it. It's warm in here."

She let her son pull her coat off, then reached for a glass. By the time Leo got back from depositing the mink on the divan we all had glasses, and when he had his we raised them, and our eyes went to Bottweill.

His eyes flashed around. "There are times," he said, "when love takes over. There are times—"

"Wait a minute," Alfred Kiernan cut in. "You enjoy it too. You don't like this stuff."

"I can stand a sip, Al."

"But you won't enjoy it. Wait." Kiernan put his glass on the bar and marched to the door on the left and on out. In five seconds he was back with a bottle in his hand, and as he rejoined us and asked Santa Claus for a glass I saw the Pernod label. He pulled the cork, which had been pulled before, filled the glass half-way, and held it out to Bottweill. "There," he said. "That will make it unanimous."

"Thanks, Al." Bottweill took it. "My secret public vice." He raised the glass. "I repeat, there are times when love takes over.—Santa Claus, where is yours? But I suppose you can't drink through that mask.—There are times when all the little de-

mons disappear down their rat-holes, and ugliness itself takes on the shape of beauty; when the darkest corner is touched by light; when the coldest heart feels the glow of warmth; when the trumpet call of good will and good cheer drowns out all the Babel of mean little noises. This is such a time. Merry Christmas! Merry merry merry!"

I was ready to touch glasses, but both the angel and the boss steered theirs to their lips, so I and the others followed suit. I thought Bottweill's eloquence deserved more than a sip, so I took a healthy gulp, and from the corner of my eye I saw that he was doing likewise with the Pernod. As I lowered the glass my eyes went to Mrs. Jerome, as she spoke.

"That was lovely," she declared. "Simply lovely. I must write it down and have it printed. That part about the trumpet call—*Kurt!* What is it? *Kurt!*"

He had dropped the glass and was clutching his throat with both hands. As I moved he thrust his arms out, and let out a yell. I think he yelled "Merry!" but I wasn't really listening.

Others started for him too, but my reflexes were better trained for emergencies than any of theirs, so I got to him first. As I got my arms around him he started choking and gurgling; and a spasm went over him from head to foot

that nearly loosened my grip.

The others were making noises, but no screams, and someone was clawing at my arm. As I was telling them to get back and give me room, he was suddenly a dead weight, and I almost went down with him and might have if Kiernan hadn't grabbed his arm.

I called, "Get a doctor!" and Cherry ran to a table where there was a gold-leaf phone. Kiernan and I let Bottweill down on the rug. He was out, breathing fast and hard, but as I was straightening his head his breathing slowed down and foam showed on his lips.

Mrs. Jerome was commanding us, "Do something, do something!"

There was nothing to do and I knew it. While I was holding onto him I had got a whiff of his breath, and now, kneeling, I leaned over to get my nose an inch from his, and I knew that smell, and it takes a big dose to hit that quick and hard.

Kiernan was loosening Bottweill's tie and collar. Cherry Quon called to us that she had tried a doctor and couldn't get him and was trying another. Margot was squatting at Bottweill's feet, taking his shoes off, and I could have told her she might as well let him die with his boots on but didn't. I had two fingers on his wrist and my other hand inside his shirt, and could feel him going.

When I could feel nothing I abandoned the chest and wrist, took his hand, which was a fist, straightened the middle finger, and pressed its nail with my thumbtip until it was white. When I removed my thumb the nail stayed white. Dropping the hand, I yanked a little cluster of fibers from the rug, told Kiernan not to move, placed the fibers against Bottweill's nostrils, fastened my eyes on them, and held my breath for thirty seconds. The fibers didn't move.

I stood up and spoke. "His heart has stopped and he's not breathing. If a doctor came within three minutes and washed out his stomach with chemicals he wouldn't have with him, there might be one chance in a thousand. As it is—"

"Can't you do something?" Mrs. Jerome squawked.

"Not for him, no. I'm not an officer of the law, but I'm a licensed detective, and I'm supposed to know how to act in these circumstances, and I'll get it if I don't follow the rules. Of course—"

"Do something!" Mrs. Jerome squawked.

Kiernan's voice came from behind me. "He's dead."

I didn't turn to ask what test he had used. "Of course," I told them, "his drink was poisoned. Until the police come no one will touch anything, especially the

bottle of Pernod, and no one will leave this room. You will—"

I stopped dead. Then I demanded, "Where is Santa Claus?"

Their heads turned to look at the bar. No bartender. On the chance that it had been too much for him, I pushed between Leo Jerome and Emil Hatch to step to the end of the bar, but he wasn't on the floor either.

I wheeled. "Did anyone see him go?"

They hadn't. Hatch said, "He didn't take the elevator. I'm sure he didn't. He must have—" He started off.

I blocked him. "You stay here. I'll take a look. Kiernan, phone the police. Spring seven-three-one-hundred."

I made for the door on the left and passed through, pulling it shut as I went, and was in Bottweill's office, which I had seen before. It was one-fourth the size of the studio, and much more subdued, but was by no means squalid.

I crossed to the far end, saw through the glass panel that Bottweill's private elevator wasn't there, and pressed the button. A clank and a whirr came from inside the shaft, and it was coming.

When it was up and had jolted to a stop I opened the door, and there on the floor was Santa Claus, but only the outside of him. He had molted. Jacket,

breeches, mask, wig . . . I didn't check to see if it was all there, because I had another errand and not much time for it.

Propping the elevator door open with a chair, I went and circled around Bottweill's big gold-leaf desk to his gold-leaf wastebasket. It was one-third full. Bending, I started to paw, decided that was inefficient, picked it up and dumped it, and began tossing things back in one by one.

Some of the items were torn pieces of paper, but none of them came from a marriage license.

When I had finished I stayed down a moment, squatting, wondering if I had hurried too much and possibly missed it, and I might have gone through it again if I hadn't heard a faint noise from the studio that sounded like the elevator door opening.

I went to the door to the studio and opened it, and as I crossed the sill two uniformed cops were deciding whether to give their first glance to the dead or the living.

Three hours later we were seated, more or less in a group, and my old friend and foe, Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide, stood surveying us, his square jaw jutting and his big burly frame erect.

He spoke. "Mr. Kiernan and Mr. Hatch will be taken to the District Attorney's office for further questioning. The rest of

you go for the present, but you will keep yourselves available at the addresses you have given. Before you go I want to ask you again, here together, about the man who was here as Santa Claus. You have all claimed you know nothing about him. Do you still claim that?"

It was twenty minutes to seven. Some two dozen city employees—medical examiner, photographer, fingerprinters, meat-basket bearers, the whole kaboodle—had finished the on-the-scene routine, including private interviews with the eyewitnesses. I had made the highest score, having had sessions with Stebbins, a precinct man, and Inspector Cramer who had departed around five o'clock to organize the hunt for Santa Claus.

"I'm not objecting," Kiernan told Stebbins, "to going to the District Attorney's office. I'm not objecting to anything. But we've told you all we can, I know I have. It seems to me your job is to find him."

"Do you mean to say," Mrs. Jerome demanded, "that no one knows anything at all about him?"

"So they say," Purley told her. "No one even knew there was going to be a Santa Claus, so they say. He was brought to this room by Bottweill, about a quarter to three, from his office. The idea is that Bottweill himself had arranged for him, and he came

up in the private elevator and put on the costume in Bottweill's office. You may as well know there is some corroboration of that. We have found out where the costume came from—Burleson's on Forty-sixth Street. Bottweill phoned them yesterday afternoon and ordered it sent here, marked personal. Miss Quon admits receiving the package and taking it to Bottweill in his office."

For a cop, you never just state a fact, or report it or declare it or say it. You admit it.

"We are also," Purley admitted, "covering agencies which might have supplied a man to act Santa Claus, but that's a big order. If Bottweill got a man through an agency there's no telling what he got. If it was a man with a record, when he saw trouble coming he beat it. With everybody's attention on Bottweill, he sneaked out, for his clothes, whatever he had taken off, in Bottweill's office, and went down in the elevator he had come up in. He shed the costume on the way down and left it in the elevator. If that was it, if he was just a man Bottweill hired, he wouldn't have had any reason to kill him—and besides, he wouldn't have known that Bottweill's only drink was Pernod, and he wouldn't have known where the poison was."

"Also," Emil Hatch said, sourer than ever, "if he was just

hired for the job he was a damn fool to sneak out. He might have known he'd be found. So he wasn't just hired. He was someone who knew Bottweill, and knew about the Pernod and the poison, and had some good reason for wanting to kill him. You're wasting your time on the agencies."

Stebbins lifted his heavy broad-shoulders and dropped them. "We waste most of our time, Mr. Hatch. Maybe he was too scared to think. I just want you to understand that if we find him and that's how Bottweill got him, it's going to be hard to believe that he put poison in that bottle, but somebody did. I want you to understand that so you'll understand why you are all to be available at the addresses you have given. Don't make any mistake about that."

"Do you mean," Mrs. Jerome demanded, "that we are under suspicion? That *I* and *my son* are under suspicion?"

Purley opened his mouth and shut it again. With that kind he always had trouble with his impulses. He wanted to say, "You're damn right you are." He did say, "I mean we're going to find that Santa Claus, and when we do we'll see. If we can't tag him for it we'll have to look further, and we'll expect all of you to help us. I'm taking it for granted you'll all want to help. Don't you want to, Mrs. Jerome?"

"I would help if I could, but I know nothing about it. I only know that my very dear friend is dead, and I don't intend to be abused and threatened. What about the poison?"

"You know about it. You have been questioned about it."

"I know I have, but what about it?"

"It must have been apparent from the questions. The medical examiner thinks it was cyanide and expects the autopsy to verify it. Emil Hatch uses potassium cyanide in his work with metals and plating, and there is a large jar of it on a cupboard shelf in the workshop one floor below, and there is a stair from Bottweill's office to the workroom. Anyone who knew that, and who also knew that Bottweill kept a case of Pernod in a cabinet in his office, and an open bottle of it in a drawer of his desk, couldn't have asked for a better setup. Four of you have admitted knowing both of those things. Three of you—Mrs. Jerome, Leo Jerome, and Archie Goodwin—admit they knew about the Pernod but deny they knew about the potassium cyanide. That will—"

"That's not true! She did know about it!"

Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome's hand shot out across her son's knees and slapped Cherry Quon's cheek or mouth or both. Her son

grabbed her arm. Alfred Kiernan sprang to his feet, and for a second I thought he was going to sock Mrs. Jerome, and possibly he would have if Margot Dickey hadn't jerked at his coattail. Cherry put her hand to her face but, except for that, didn't move.

"Sit down," Stebbins told Kieran. "Take it easy. Miss Quon, you say Mrs. Jerome knew about the potassium cyanide?"

"Of course she did." Cherry's chirp was pitched lower than normal, but it was still a chirp. "In the workshop one day I heard Mr. Hatch telling her how he used it and how careful he had to be."

"Mr. Hatch? Do you verify—"

"Nonsense," Mrs. Jerome snapped. "What if he did? Perhaps he did. I had forgotten all about it. I told you I won't tolerate this abuse!"

Purley eyed her. "Look here, Mrs. Jerome. When we find that Santa Claus, if it was someone who knew Bottweill and had a motive, that may settle it. If not, it won't help anyone to talk about abuse, and that includes you. So far as I know now, only one of you has told us a lie. You. That's on the record. I'm telling you, and all of you, lies only make it harder for you, but sometimes they make it easier for us. I'll leave it at that for now. Mr. Kieran, and Mr. Hatch, these men"—he aimed a thumb over his shoulder at two dicks standing

back of him—"will take you downtown. The rest of you can go, but remember what I said. Goodwin, I want to see you."

He had already seen me, but I wouldn't make a point of it. Kiernan, however, had a point to make, and made it: he had to leave last so he could lock up. It was so arranged. The three women, Leo Jerome, and Stebbins and I took the elevator down, leaving the two dicks with Kiernan and Hatch.

Down on the sidewalk, as they headed in different directions, I could see no sign of tails taking after them. It was still snowing, a fine prospect for Christmas and the street cleaners. There were police cars at the curb, and Purley went to one, opened the door, and motioned to me to get in.

I objected. "If I'm invited downtown too I'm willing to oblige, but I'm going to eat first. I damn near starved to death there once."

"You're not wanted downtown, not right now. Get in out of the snow."

I did so, and slid across under the wheel to make room for him. He needs room. He joined me and pulled the door shut.

"If we're going to sit here," I suggested, "we might as well be rolling. Don't bother to cross town, just drop me at Thirty-fifth."

He objected: "I don't like to

drive and talk. Or listen. What were you doing there today?"

"I've told you. Having fun. Three kinds of champagne. Miss Dickey invited me."

"I'm giving you another chance. You were the only outsider there. Why? You're nothing special to Miss Dickey. She was going to marry Bottweill. Why?"

"Ask her."

"We have asked her. She says there was no particular reason, she knew Bottweill liked you, and they've regarded you as one of them since you found some tapestries for them. She stuttered around about it. What I say, any time I find you anywhere near a murder, I want to know why. I'm giving you another chance."

So she hadn't mentioned the marriage license. Good for her. I would rather have eaten all the snow that had fallen since noon than explain that damn license to Sergeant Stebbins or Inspector Cramer. That was why I had gone through the wastebasket.

"Thanks for the chance," I told him, "but I can't use it. I've told you everything I saw and heard there today." That put me in a class with Mrs. Jerome, since I had left out my little talk with Margot. "I've told you all I know about those people. Lay off and go find your murderer."

"I know you, Goodwin."

"Yeah, you've even called me Archie. I treasure that memory."

"I know you." His head was turned on his bull neck, and our eyes were meeting. "Do you expect me to believe that guy got out of that room and away without you knowing it?"

"Nuts. I was kneeling on the floor, watching a man die, and they were all around us. Anyway, you're just talking to hear yourself. You don't think I was accessory to the murder or to the murderer's escape."

"I didn't say I did. Even if he was wearing gloves—and what for if not to leave no prints?—I don't say he was the murderer. But if you knew who he was and didn't want him involved in it, and let him get away, and if you let us wear out our ankles looking for him, what about that?"

"That would be bad. If I asked my advice I would be against it."

"Damn it," he barked, "do you know who he is?"

"No."

"Did you or Wolfe have anything to do with getting him there?"

"No."

"All right, pile out. They'll be wanting you downtown."

"I hope not tonight. I'm tired." I opened the door. "You have my address." I stepped out into the snow, and he started the engine and rolled off.

It should have been a good hour for an empty taxi, but in

a Christmas-season snowstorm it took me ten minutes to find one. When it pulled up in front of the old brownstone on West Thirteenth Street it was eight minutes to eight.

As usual in my absence, the chain-bolt was on, and I had to ring for Fritz to let me in. I asked him if Wolfe was back, and he said yes, he was at dinner. As I put my hat on the shelf and my coat on a hanger, I asked if there was any left for me, and he said plenty, and moved aside for me to precede him down the hall to the door of the dining room. Fritz has fine manners.

Wolfe, in his oversized chair at the end of the table, told me good evening, not snapping or barking. I returned it, got seated at my place, picked up my napkin, and apologized for being late.

Fritz came from the kitchen with a warm plate, a platter of braised boned ducklings, and a dish of potatoes baked with mushrooms and cheese. I took enough. Wolfe asked if it was still snowing and I said yes. After a good mouthful had been disposed of, I spoke.

"As you know, I approve of your rule not to discuss business during a meal, but I've got something on my chest and it's not business. It's personal."

He grunted. "The death of Mr. Bottweil was on the radio at seven o'clock. You were there."

"Yeah. I was there. I was kneeling by him while he died." I replenished my mouth. Damn the radio. I hadn't intended to mention the murder until I had dealt with the main issue from my standpoint. When there was room enough for my tongue to work I went on, "I'll report on that in full if you want it, but I doubt if there's a job in it. Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome is the only suspect with enough jack to pay your fee, and she has already notified Purley Stebbins that she won't be abused. Besides, when they find Santa Claus that may settle it. What I want to report on happened before Bottweill died. That marriage license I showed you is for the birds. Miss Dickey has called it off. I am out two bucks. She told me she had decided to marry Bottweill."

He was sopping a crust in the sauce on his plate. "Indeed," he said.

"Yes, sir. It was a jolt, but I would have recovered, in time. Then ten minutes later Bottweill was dead. Where does that leave me? Sitting around up there through the routine, I considered it. Perhaps I could get her back now, but no, thank you. That license has been destroyed. I get another one, another two bucks, and then she tells me she has decided to marry Joe Doakes. I'm going to forget her. I'm going to blot her out."

I resumed on the duckling. Wolfe was busy chewing. When he could he said, "For me, of course, this is satisfactory."

"I know it is. Do you want to hear about Bottweill?"

"After dinner."

"Okay. How did you make out with Thonipson?"

But that didn't appeal to him as a dinner topic either. In fact, nothing did. Usually he likes table talk, about anything from refrigerators to Republicans, but apparently the trip to Long Island and back, with all its dangers, had tired him out. It suited me all right, since I had had a noisy afternoon too and could stand a little silence.

When we had both done well with the duckling and potatoes and salad and baked pears and cheese and coffee, he pushed back his chair.

"There's a book," he said, "that I want to look at. It's up in your room—*Here and Now*, by Herbert Block. Will you bring it down, please?"

Though it meant climbing two flights with a full stomach, I was glad to oblige, out of appreciation for his calm acceptance of my announcement of my shattered hopes. He could have been very vocal. So I mounted the stairs cheerfully, went to my room, and crossed to the shelves where I keep a few books.

There were only a couple of

dozen of them, and I knew where each one was, but *Here and Now* wasn't there. Where it should have been was a gap. I looked around, saw a book on the dresser, and stepped to it. It was *Here and Now*, and lying on top of it was a pair of white cotton gloves.

I gawked.

I would like to say that I caught on immediately, the second I spotted them, but I didn't. I had picked them up and looked them over, and put one of them on and taken it off again, before I fully realized that there was only one possible explanation.

Having realized it, instantly there was a traffic jam inside my skull, horns blowing, brakes squealing, head-on collisions. To deal with it I went to a chair and sat. It took me a minute to reach my first conclusion.

He had taken this method of telling me he was Santa Claus, instead of just telling me, because he wanted me to think it over on my own before we talked it over together.

Why did he want me to think it over on my own? That took a little longer, but with the traffic under control I found my way through to the only acceptable answer: He had decided to give up his trip to see Thompson, and instead to arrange with Bottweill to attend the Christmas party disguised as Santa Claus, because the idea of a woman living in

his house—or of the only alternative, my leaving—had made him absolutely desperate, and he had to see for himself. He had to see Margot and me together, and to talk with her if possible.

If he found out that the marriage license was a hoax he would have me by the tail; he could tell me he would be delighted to welcome my bride and watch me wriggle out. If he found that I really meant it he would know what he was up against and go on from there.

The point was this, that he had shown what he really thought of me. He had shown that rather than lose me he would do something that he wouldn't have done for any fee anybody could name. He would rather have gone without beer for a week than admit it, but now he was a fugitive from justice in a murder case and needed me.

So he had to let me know, but he wanted it understood that that aspect of the matter was not to be mentioned. The assumption would be that he had gone to Bottweill's instead of Long Island because he loved to dress up like Santa Claus and tend bar.

A cell in my brain tried to get the right of way for the question, considering this development, how big a raise should I get after New Year's? But I waved it to the curb.

I thought over other aspects.

He had worn the gloves so I couldn't recognize his hands. Where did he get them? What time had he got to Bottweill's and who had seen him? Did Fritz know where he was going? How had he got back home?

But after a little of that I realized that he hadn't sent me up to my room to ask myself questions he could answer, so I went back to considering whether there was anything else he wanted me to think over alone. Deciding there wasn't, after chewing it thoroughly, I got *Here and Now* and the gloves from the dresser, went to the stairs and descended, and entered the office.

From behind his desk he glared at me as I crossed over.

"Here it is," I said, and handed him the book. "And much obliged for the gloves." I held them up, one in each hand, dangling them from thumb and fingertip.

"It is no occasion for clowning," he growled.

"It sure isn't." I dropped the gloves on my desk, whirled my chair, and sat. "Where do we start? Do you want to know what happened after you left?"

"The details can wait. First where we stand. Was Mr. Cramer there?"

"Yes. Certainly."

"Did he get anywhere?"

"No. He probably won't until he finds Santa Claus. Until they find Santa Claus they won't dig

very hard at the others. The longer it takes to find him the surer they'll be he's it. Three things about him: nobody knows who he was, he beat it, and he wore gloves. A thousand men are looking for him. You were right to wear the gloves, I would have recognized your hands, but where did you get them?"

"At a store on Ninth Avenue. Confound it, I didn't know a man was going to be murdered!"

"I know you didn't. May I ask some questions?"

He scowled. I took it for yes. "When did you phone Bottweill to arrange it?"

"At two thirty yesterday afternoon. You had gone to the bank."

"Have you any reason to think he told anyone about it?"

"No. He said he wouldn't."

"I know he got the costume, so that's okay. When you left here today at twelve thirty, did you go straight to Bottweill's?"

"No. I left at that hour because you and Fritz expected me to. I stopped to buy the gloves, and met Bottweill at Rusterman's, and we had lunch. From there we took a cab to his place, arriving shortly after two o'clock, and took his private elevator up to his office. Immediately on entering his office, he got a bottle of Pernod from a drawer of his desk, said he always had a little after lunch, and invited me to join him. I declined. He poured a liberal por-

tion in a glass, about two ounces, drank it in two gulps, and returned the bottle to the drawer."

"My God," I whistled. "The cops would like to know *that*."

"No doubt. The costume was there in a box. There is a dressing room at the rear of his office, with a bathroom—"

"I know, I've used it."

"I took the costume there and put it on. He had ordered the largest size, but it was a squeeze and it took a while. I was in there half an hour or more. When I re-entered the office it was empty, but soon Bottweill came, up the stairs from the workshop, and helped me with the mask and wig. They had barely been adjusted when Emil Hatch and Mrs. Jerome and her son appeared, also coming up the stairs from the workshop. I left, going to the studio, and found Miss Quon, Miss Dickey and Mr. Kiernan there."

"And before long I was there. Then no one saw you unmasked. When did you put the gloves on?"

"The last thing. Just before I entered the studio."

"Then you may have left prints. I know, you didn't know there was going to be a murder. You left your clothes in the dressing room? Are you sure you took everything when you left?"

"Yes. I am not a complete ass."

I let that by. "Why didn't you leave the gloves in the elevator with the costume?"

"Because they hadn't come with it, and I thought it better to take them."

"That private elevator is at the rear of the hall downstairs. Did anyone see you leaving it or passing through the hall?"

"No. The hall was empty."

"How did you get home? Taxi?"

"No. Fritz didn't expect me until six or later. I walked to the public library, spent some two hours there, and then took a-cab."

I pursed my lips and shook my head to indicate sympathy. That was his longest and hardest tramp since Montenegro. Over a mile. Fighting his way through the blizzard, in terror of the law on his tail.

But all the return I got for my look of sympathy was a scowl, so I let loose. I laughed. I put my head back and let it come. I had wanted to ever since I had learned he was Santa Claus, but had been too busy thinking. It was bottled up in me, and I let it out, good. I was about to taper off to a cackle when he exploded.

"Confound it," he bellowed, "marry and be damned!"

That was dangerous. That attitude could easily get us onto the aspect he had sent me up to my room to think over alone, and if we got started on that anything could happen. It called for tact.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

"Something caught in my throat. Do you want to describe the situation, or do you want me to?"

"I would like to hear you try," he said grimly.

"Yes, sir. I suspect that the only thing to do is to phone Inspector Cramer right now and invite him to come and have a chat, and when he comes open the bag. That will—"

"No. I will not do that."

"Then, next best, I go to him and spill it there. Of course—"

"No." He meant every word of it.

"Okay, I'll describe it. They'll mark time on the others until they find Santa Claus. They've got to find him. If he left any prints they'll compare them with every file they've got, and sooner or later they'll get to yours. They'll cover all the stores for sales of white cotton gloves to men. They'll trace Bottweill's movements and learn that he lunched with you at Rusterman's, and you left together, and they'll trace you to Bottweill's place. Of course, your going there won't prove you were Santa Claus, you might talk your way out of that, and it will account for your prints if they find some—but what about the gloves? They'll trace that sale if you give them time, and with a description of the buyer they'll find Santa Claus. You're sunk."

I had never seen his face blacker.

"If you sit tight till they find him," I argued, "it will be quite a nuisance. Cramer has been itching for years to lock you up, and any judge would commit you as a material witness who had run out. Whereas if you call Cramer now, and I mean now, and invite him to come and have some beer, while it will still be a nuisance, it will be bearable. Of course, he'll want to know why you went there and played Santa Claus, but you can tell him anything you please. Tell him you bet me a hundred bucks, or what the hell, make it a grand, that you could be in a room with me for ten minutes and I wouldn't recognize you. I'll be glad to cooperate."

I leaned forward. "Another thing. If you wait till they find you, you won't dare tell them that Bottweill took a drink from that bottle shortly after two o'clock and it didn't hurt him. If you told about that *after* they dug you up, they could book you for withholding evidence, and they probably would, and make it stick. If you get Cramer here now and tell him, he'll appreciate it, though naturally he won't say so. He's probably at his office. Shall I ring him?"

"No. I will not confess that performance to Mr. Cramer. I will not unfold the morning paper to a disclosure of that outlandish masquerade."

"Then you're going to sit and read *Here and Now* until they come with a warrant?"

"No. That would be fatuous." He took in air through his mouth, as far down as it would go, and let it out through his nose. "I'm going to find the murderer and present him to Mr. Cramer. There's nothing else."

"Oh. You are."

"Yes."

"You might have said so and saved my breath, instead of letting me spout."

"I wanted to see if your appraisal of the situation agreed with mine. It does."

"That's fine. Then you also know that we may have two weeks and we may have two minutes. At this very second some expert may be phoning Homicide to say that he has found fingerprints that match the card of Wolfe, Nero—"

The phone rang, and I jerked around as if someone had stuck a needle in me. Maybe we wouldn't have even two minutes. My hand wasn't trembling as I lifted the receiver, I hope. Wolfe seldom lifts his until I have found out who it is, but that time he did:

"Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is the District Attorney's office, Mr. Goodwin. Regarding the murder of Kurt Bottweill. We would like you to be here at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"All right. Sure."

"At ten o'clock sharp, please."

"I'll be there."

We hung up. Wolfe sighed. I sighed.

"Well," I said, "I've already told them six times that I know absolutely nothing about Santa Claus, so they may not ask me again. If they do, it will be interesting to compare my voice when I'm lying with when I'm telling the truth."

He grunted. "Now: I want a complete report of what happened there after I left, but first I want background. In your intimate association with Miss Dickey you must have learned things about those people. What?"

"Not much." I cleared my throat. "I guess I'll have to explain something. My association with Miss Dickey was not intimate." I stopped. It wasn't easy.

"Choose your own adjective. I meant no innuendo."

"It's not a question of adjectives. Miss Dickey is a good dancer, exceptionally good, and for the past couple of months I have been taking her here and there, some six or eight times altogether. Monday evening at the Flamingo Club she asked me to do her a favor. She said Bottweill was giving her a runaround; that he had been going to marry her for a year but kept stalling, and she wanted to do something. She said Cherry Quon was making a play

for him, and she didn't intend to let Cherry take the rail. She asked me to get a marriage license blank and fill it out for her and me and give it to her. She would show it to Bottweill and tell him now or never. It struck me as a good deed with no risk involved, and, as I say, she is a good dancer. Tuesday afternoon I got a blank, no matter how, and that evening, up in my room, I filled it in, including a fancy signature."

Wolfe made a noise.

"That's all," I said, "except that I want to make it clear that I had no intention of showing it to you. I did that on the spur of the moment when you picked up your book. Your memory is as good as mine. Also, to close it up, no doubt you noticed that today just before Bottweill and Mrs. Jerome joined the party Margot and I stepped aside for a little chat. She told me the license did the trick. Her words were, 'Perfect, simply perfect.' She said that last evening, in his office, he tore the license up and put the pieces in his wastebasket. That's okay, the cops didn't find them. I looked before they came, and the pieces weren't there."

His mouth was working, but he didn't open it. He didn't dare. He would have liked to tear into me, to tell me that my insufferable flummery had got him into this awful mess, but if he did so he would be dragging in the aspect

he didn't want mentioned. He saw that in time, and saw that I saw it. His mouth worked, but that was all. Finally he spoke.

"Then you are not on intimate terms with Miss Dickey?"

"No, sir."

"Even so, she must have spoken of that establishment and those people."

"Some, yes."

"And one of them killed Bottweill. The poison was put in the bottles between two ten, when I saw him take a drink, and three thirty when Kiernan went and got the bottle. No one came up in the private elevator during the half hour or more I was in the dressing room. I was getting into that costume and gave no heed to footsteps or other sounds in the office, but the elevator shaft adjoins the dressing room, and I would have heard it. It is a strong probability that the opportunity was even narrower, that the poison was put in the bottle while I was in the dressing room, since three of them were in the office with Bottweill when I left. It must be assumed that one of those three, or one of the three in the studio, had grasped an earlier opportunity. What about them?"

"Not much. Mostly from Monday evening, when Margot was talking about Bottweill. So it's all hearsay, from her. Mrs. Jerome has put half a million in the business—probably you should

divide that by two at least—and thinks she owns him. Or thought. She was jealous of Margot and Cherry. As for Leo, if his mother was dishing out the dough he expected to inherit to a guy who was trying to corner the world's supply of gold leaf, and possibly might also marry him, and if he knew about the jar of poison in the workshop, he might have been tempted. Kiernan, I don't know, but from a remark Margot made and from the way he looked at Cherry this afternoon, I suspect he would like to mix some Irish with her Chinese and Indian and Dutch, and if he thought Bottweill had him stymied he might have been tempted too. So much for hearsay."

"Mr. Hatch?"

"Nothing on him from Margot, but dealing with him during the tapestry job I wouldn't have been surprised if he had wiped out the whole bunch on general principles. His heart pumps acid instead of blood. He's a creative artist, he told me so. He practically told me that he was responsible for the success of that enterprise but got no credit. He didn't tell me that he regarded Bottweill as a phony and a four-flusher, but he did. You may remember that I told you he had a persecution complex and you told me to stop using other people's jargon."

"That's four of them, Miss Dickey?"

I raised my brows. "I got her a license to marry, not to kill. If she was lying when she said it worked, she's almost as good a liar as she is a dancer. Maybe she is. If it didn't work she might have been tempted too."

"And Miss Quon?"

"She's half Oriental. I'm not up on Orientals, but I understood they slant their eyes to keep you guessing. That's what makes them inscrutable. If I had to be poisoned by one of that bunch I would want it to be her. Except for what Margot told me—"

The doorbell rang. That was worse than the phone. If they had hit on Santa Claus's trail and it led to Nero Wolfe, Cramer was much more apt to come than to phone.

Wolfe and I exchanged glances. Looking at my wrist watch and seeing 10:08, I arose, went to the hall and flipped the switch for the stoop light, and took a look through the one-way glass panel of the front door.

I have good eyes, but the figure was muffled in a heavy coat with a hood, so I stepped halfway to the door to make sure. Then I returned to the office and told Wolf, "Cherry Quon. Alone."

He frowned. "I wanted—" He cut it off. "Very well. Bring her in."

As I have said, Cherry was highly decorative, and went fine with the red leather chair at the

end of Wolfe's desk. It would have held three of her. She had let me take her coat in the hall and still had on the neat little woolen number she had worn at the party. It wasn't exactly yellow, but there was yellow in it. I would have called it off-gold, and it and the red chair and the tea tint of her smooth little carved face would have made a very nice kodachrome.

She sat on the edge, her spine straight and her hands together in her lap. "I was afraid to telephone," she said, "because you might tell me not to come. So I just came. Will you forgive me?"

Wolfe grunted. No commitment. She smiled at him, a friendly smile, or so I thought. After all, she was half Oriental.

"I must get myself together," she chirped. "I'm nervous because it's so exciting to be here." She turned her head. "There's the globe, and the bookshelves, and the safe, and the couch, and of course Archie Goodwin. And you. You behind your desk in your enormous chair! Oh, I know this place! I have read about you so much—everything there is, I think. It's exciting to be here, actually here in this chair, and see you. Of course I saw you this afternoon, but that wasn't the same thing. You could have been anybody in that silly Santa Claus costume and whiskers."

She laughed, a friendly little tinkle like a bell.

I think I looked bewildered. That was my idea, after it had got through my ears to the switchboard inside and been routed. I was too busy handling my face to look at Wolfe, but he was probably even busier, since she was looking straight at him. I moved my eyes to him when he spoke.

"If I understand you, Miss Quon, I'm at a loss. If you think you saw me this afternoon in a Santa Claus costume, you're mistaken."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. "Then you haven't told them?"

"My dear madam." His voice sharpened. "If you must talk in riddles, talk to Mr. Goodwin. He enjoys them."

"But I am sorry, Mr. Wolfe. I should have explained first how I know. This morning at breakfast Kurt told me you had phoned him and arranged to appear at the party as Santa Claus, and this afternoon I asked him if you had come and he said you had and you were putting on the costume. That's how I know. But you haven't told the police? Then it's a good thing I haven't told them either, isn't it?"

"This is interesting," Wolfe said coldly. "What do you expect to accomplish by this fantastic folderol?"

She shook her pretty little head.

"You, with so much sense. You must see that it's no use. If I tell them, even if they don't believe me, they will investigate. I know they can't investigate as well as you can, but surely they will find something."

He shut his eyes, tightened his lips, and leaned back in his chair. I kept mine open, on her. She weighed about a hundred and two. I could carry her under one arm with my other hand clamped on her mouth. Putting her in the spare room upstairs wouldn't do, since she could open a window and scream, but there was a cubbyhole in the basement, next to Fritz's room, with an old couch in it. Or, as an alternative, I could get a gun from my desk drawer and shoot her. Probably no one knew she had come here.

Wolfe opened his eyes and straightened up. "Very well. It is still fantastic, but I concede that you could create an unpleasant situation by taking that story to the police. I don't suppose you came here merely to tell me that you intend to. What do you intend?"

"I think we understand each other," she chirped.

"I understand only that you want something. What?"

"You are so direct," she complained. "So very abrupt, that I must have said something wrong. But I do want something. You see, since the police think it was

the man who acted Santa Claus and ran away, they may not get on the right track until it's too late. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

No reply.

"I wouldn't want it," she said, and her hands on her lap curled into little fists. "I wouldn't want whoever killed Kurt to get away, no matter who it was, but you see, I know who killed him. I have told the police, but they won't listen until they find Santa Claus, or if they listen they think I'm just a jealous cat, and besides, I'm an Oriental and their ideas of Orientals are very primitive. I was going to make them listen by telling them who Santa Claus was, but I know how they feel about you from what I've read, and I was afraid they would try to prove it was you who killed Kurt, and of course it could have been you, and you did run away, and they still wouldn't listen to me when I told them who did kill him."

She stopped for breath.

Wolfe inquired, "Who did?"

She nodded. "I'll tell you. Margot Dickey and Kurt were having an affair. A few months ago Kurt began on me, and it was hard for me because I—I—" She frowned for a word, and found one. "I had a feeling for him. I had a strong feeling. But you see, I am a virgin, and I wouldn't give in to him. I don't

know what I would have done if I hadn't known he was having an affair with Margot, but I did know, and I told him the first man I slept with would be my husband. He said he was willing to give up Margot, but even if he did he couldn't marry me on account of Mrs. Jerome, because she would stop backing him with her money. I don't know what he was to Mrs. Jerome, but I know what she was to him."

Her hands opened and closed again to be fists. "That went on and on, but Kurt had a feeling for me too. Last night late, it was after midnight, he phoned me that he had broken with Margot for good and he wanted to marry me. He wanted to come and see me, but I told him I was in bed and we would see each other in the morning. He said that would be at the studio with other people there, so finally I said I would go to his apartment for breakfast, and I did, this morning. But I am still a virgin, Mr. Wolfe."

He was focused on her with half-closed eyes. "That is your privilege, madam."

"Oh," she said. "Is it a privilege? It was there, at breakfast, that he told me about you, your arranging to be Santa Claus. When I got to the studio I was surprised to see Margot there, and how friendly she was. That was part of her plan, to be friendly and cheerful with

everyone. She has told the police that Kurt was going to marry her, that they decided last night to get married next week, Christmas week. I am a Christian."

Wolf stirred in his chair. "Have we reached the point? Did Miss Dickey kill Mr. Bottweill?"

"Yes. Of course she did."

"Have you told the police that?"

"Yes. I didn't tell them all I have told you, but enough."

"With evidence?"

"No. I have no evidence."

"Then you're vulnerable to an action for slander."

She opened her fists and turned her palms up. "Does that matter? When I know I'm right? When I know it? But she was so clever, the way she did it, that there can't be any evidence. Everybody there today knew about the poison, and they all had a chance to put it in the bottle. They can never prove she did it. They can't even prove she is lying when she says Kurt was going to marry her, because he is dead. She acted today the way she would have acted if that had been true. But it has got to be proved somehow. There has got to be evidence to prove it."

"And you want me to get it?"

She let that pass. "What I was thinking, Mr. Wolfe, you are vulnerable too. There will always be the danger that the police will find out who Santa Claus was,

and if they find it was you and you didn't tell them—”

“I haven't conceded that,” Wolfe snapped.

“Then we'll just say there will always be the danger that I'll tell them what Kurt told me, and you did concede that that would be unpleasant. So it would be better if the evidence proved who killed Kurt and also proved who Santa Claus was. Wouldn't it?”

“Go on.”

“So I thought how easy it would be for you to get the evidence. You have men who do things for you, who would do anything for you, and one of them can say that you asked him to go there and be Santa Claus; and he did. Of course it couldn't be Mr. Goodwin, since he was at the party, and it would have to be a man they couldn't prove was somewhere else. He can say that while he was in the dressing room putting on the costume he heard someone in the office and peeked out to see who it was, and he saw Margot Dickey get the bottle from the desk drawer and put something in it and put the bottle back in the drawer, and go out. That must have been when she did it, because Kurt always took a drink of Pernod when he came back from lunch.”

Wolfe was rubbing his lip with a fingertip. “I see,” he muttered.

She wasn't through. “He can say,” she went on, “that he ran

away because he was frightened and wanted to tell you about it first. I don't think they would do anything to him if he went to them tomorrow morning and told them all about it, would they? Just like me. I don't think they would do anything to me if I went to them tomorrow morning and told them I had remembered that Kurt told me that you were going to be Santa Claus, and this afternoon he told me you were in the dressing room putting on the costume. That would be the same kind of thing, wouldn't it?”

Her little carved mouth thinned and widened with a smile. “That's what I want,” she chirped. “Did I say it so you understand it?”

“You did indeed,” Wolfe assured her. “You put it admirably.”

“Would it be better, instead of him going to tell them, for you to have Inspector Cramer come here, and you tell him? You could have the man here. You see, I know how you do things, from all I have read.”

“That might be better,” he allowed. His tone was dry but not hostile. I could see a muscle twitching beneath his right ear, but she couldn't. “I suppose, Miss Quon, it is futile to advance the possibility that one of the others killed him, and if so it would be a pity—”

“Excuse me. I interrupt.” The chirp was still a chirp, but it had

hard steel in it. "I know she killed him."

"I don't. And even if I bow to your conviction, before I could undertake the stratagem you propose I would have to make sure there are no facts that would scuttle it. It won't take me long. You'll hear from me tomorrow. I'll want—"

She interrupted again. "I can't wait longer than tomorrow morning to tell what Kurt told me."

"Pfui. You can and will. The moment you disclose that, you no longer have a whip to dangle at me. You will hear from me tomorrow. Now I want to think, Archie?"

I left my chair. She looked up at me and back at Wolfe. For some seconds she sat, considering—inscrutable, of course—then stood up.

"It was very exciting to be here," she said, the steel gone, "to see you here. You must forgive me for not phoning. I hope it will be early tomorrow." She turned and headed for the door, and I followed.

After I had helped her on with her hooded coat, and let her out, and watched her picking her way down the seven steps, I shut the door, put the chain-bolt on, returned to the office, and told Wolfe, "It has stopped snowing. Who do you think will be best for it, Saul or Fred or Orrie or Bill?"

"Sit down," he growled. "You see through women. Well?"

"Not that one. I pass. I wouldn't bet a dime on her one way or the other. Would you?"

"No. She is probably a liar and possibly a murderer. Sit down. I must have everything that happened there today after I left. Every word and gesture."

I sat and gave it to him. Including the question period, it took an hour and thirty-five minutes. It was after one o'clock when he pushed his chair back, levered his bulk upright, told me good night, and went up to bed.

At half past two the following afternoon, Saturday, I sat in a room in a building on Leonard Street, the room where I had once swiped an Assistant District Attorney's lunch. There would be no need for me to repeat the performance; since I had just come back from Ost's restaurant, where I had put away a plateful of pig's knuckles and sauerkraut.

As far as I knew, there had not only been no steps to frame Margot for murder, there had been no steps at all. Since Wolfe is up in the plant rooms every morning from nine to eleven, and since he breakfasts from a tray up in his room; and since I was expected downtown at ten o'clock, I had buzzed him on the house phone a little before nine to ask for instructions and had been told that he had none.

Downtown, Assistant D.A. Farrell, after letting me wait in the anteroom for an hour, had spent two hours with me, together with a stenographer and a dick who had been on the scene Friday afternoon, going back and forth and zigzag; not only over what I had already reported, but also over my previous association with the Bottweill personnel. He only asked me once if I knew anything about Santa Claus, so I only had to lie once, if you don't count my omitting any mention of the marriage license.

When he called a recess and told me to come back at two thirty, on my way to Ost's for the pig's knuckles I phoned Wolfe to tell him I didn't know when I would be home, and again he had no instructions. I said I doubted if Cherry Quon would wait until after New Year's to spill the beans, and he said he did too and hung up.

When I was ushered back into Farrell's office at two thirty he was alone—no stenographer and no dick. He asked me if I had had a good lunch, and even waited for me to answer, handed me some typewritten sheets, and leaned back in his chair.

"Read it over," he said, "and see if you want to sign it."

His tone seemed to imply that I might not, so I went over it carefully, five full pages. Finding no editorial revisions to object to,

I pulled my chair forward to a corner of his desk, put the statement on the desk top, and got my pen from my pocket.

"Wait a minute," Farrell said. "You're not a bad guy even if you are cocky, and why not give you a break? That says specifically that you have reported everything you did there yesterday afternoon."

"Yeah, I've read it. So?"

"So who put your fingerprints on some of the pieces of paper in Bottweill's wastebasket?"

"I'll be damned," I said. "I forgot to put gloves on."

"All right, you're cocky. I already know that." His eyes were pinning me. "You must have gone through that wastebasket, every item, when you went to Bottweill's office ostensibly to look for Santa Claus, and you hadn't just forgotten it. You don't forget things. So you have deliberately left it out. I want to know why, and I want to know what you took from that wastebasket and what you did with it."

I grinned at him. "I am also damned because I thought I knew how thorough they are and apparently I didn't. I wouldn't have supposed they went so far as to dust the contents of a wastebasket when there was nothing to connect them, but I see I was wrong, and I hate to be wrong." I shrugged. "Well, we learn something new every day." I

screwed the statement around to position, signed it at the bottom of the last page, slid it across to him, and folded the carbon copy and put it in my pocket.

"I'll write it in if you insist," I told him, "but I doubt if it's worth the trouble. Santa Claus had run, Kiernan was calling the police, and I guess I was a little rattled. I must have looked around for something that might give me a line on Santa Claus, and my eye lit on the wastebasket, and I went through it. I haven't mentioned it because it wasn't very bright, and I like people to think I'm bright, especially cops. There's your why. As for what I took, the answer is nothing. I dumped the wastebasket, put everything back in, and took nothing. Do you want me to write that in?"

"No. I want to discuss it. I know you *are* bright. And you weren't rattled. You don't rattle. I want to know the real reason you went through the wastebasket, what you were after, whether you got it, and what you did with it."

It cost me more than an hour, twenty minutes of which were spent in the office of the District Attorney himself, with Farrell present. At one point it looked as if they were going to hold me as a material witness, but that takes a warrant, the Christmas week-end had started, and there

was nothing to show that I had monkeyed with anything that could be evidence, so finally they shooed me out, after I had handwritten an insert in my statement. It was too bad keeping such important public servants sitting there while I copied that insert on my carbon, but I like to do things right.

By the time I got home it was ten minutes past four, and, of course, Wolfe wasn't in the office, since his afternoon session up in the plant rooms is from four to six. There was no note on my desk from him, so apparently there were still no instructions; but there was information on it. My desk ashtray, which is mostly for decoration since I seldom smoke—a gift, not to Wolfe but, to me, from a former client—is a jade bowl six inches across. It was there in its place, and in it were three stubs from Pharaoh cigarettes.

Saul Panzer smokes Pharaohs. I suppose a few other people do too, but the chance that one of them had been sitting at my desk while I was gone was too slim to bother with. And not only had Saul been there, but Wolfe wanted me to know it, since one of the eight million things he will not tolerate in the office is ashtrays with remains. He will actually walk clear to the bathroom himself to empty one.

So steps were being taken, after

all. What steps? Saul, a free lance and the best operative anywhere around, asks and gets sixty bucks a day, and is worth twice that. Wolfe had not called him in for any routine errand; and, of course, the idea that he had undertaken to sell him on doubling for Santa Claus never entered my head. Framing someone for murder—even a woman who might be guilty—was not in Wolfe's bag of tricks.

I got at the house phone and buzzed the plant rooms, and after a wait had Wolfe's voice in my ear.

"Yes, Fritz?"

"Not Fritz. Me. I'm back. Nothing urgent to report. They found my prints on stuff in the wastebasket, but I escaped without loss of blood. Is it all right for me to empty my ashtray?"

"Yes. Please do so."

"Then what do I do?"

"I'll tell you at six o'clock. Possibly earlier."

He hung up. I went to the safe and looked in the cash drawer to see if Saul had been supplied with generous funds, but the cash was as I had last seen it and there was no entry in the book.

I emptied the ashtray. I went to the kitchen, where I found Fritz pouring a mixture into a bowl of fresh pork tenderloin, and said I hoped Saul had enjoyed his

lunch, and Fritz said he hadn't stayed for lunch. So steps must have been begun right after I left in the morning.

I went back to the office, read over the carbon copy of my statement before filing it, and passed the time by thinking up eight different steps that Saul might have been assigned, but none of them struck me as promising.

A little after five the phone rang and I answered. It was Saul. He said he was glad to know I was back home safe.

"Just a message for Mr. Wolfe," he said. "Tell him everything is set, no snags."

"That's all?"

"Right. I'll be seeing you."

I cradled the receiver, sat a moment to consider whether to go up to the plant rooms or use the house phone, decided the latter would do, and pulled it to me and pushed the button. When Wolfe's voice came it was peevish.

"Yes?"

"Saul called and said to tell you everything is set, no snags. Congratulations. Am I in the way?"

"Oddly enough, no. Have chairs in place for visitors—ten chairs should be enough. Four or five will come shortly after six o'clock. The others will come later."

"Anything else for me?"

"No."

He was gone. Before going to

the front room for chairs, and to the kitchen for supplies, I took time out to ask myself whether I had the slightest notion what kind of charade he was cooking up this time. I hadn't.

It was four. They all arrived between six fifteen and six twenty—first Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome and her son Leo, then Cherry Quon, and last Emil Hatch.

Mrs. Jerome copped the red leather chair, but I moved her, mink and all, to one of the yellow ones when Cherry came. I was willing to concede that Cherry might be headed for a very different kind of chair, wired for power, but even so I thought she rated that background and Mrs. Jerome didn't.

By six thirty, when I left them to cross the hall to the dining room, not a word had passed among them.

In the dining room Wolfe had just finished a bottle of beer. "Okay," I told him, "it's six thirty-one. Only four. Kiernan and Margot Dickey haven't shown."

"Satisfactory." He arose. "Have they demanded information?"

"Two of them have, Hatch and Mrs. Jerome. I told them it will come from you, as instructed. That was easy, since I have no information."

He headed for the office, and I followed. Though they didn't

know, except Cherry, that he had poured champagne for them the day before, introductions weren't necessary because they had all met him during the tapestry hunt. After circling around Cherry in the red leather chair he sat down.

"I don't thank you for coming," he said, "because you came in your own interest, not mine, I sent—"

"I came," Hatch cut in, sourer than ever, "to find out what you're up to."

"You will," Wolfe assured him. "I sent each of you an identical message, saying that Mr. Goodwin has certain information which he feels he must give the police not later than tonight, but I have persuaded him to let me discuss it with you first. Before I—"

"I didn't know others would be here," Mrs. Jerome blurted, glaring at Cherry.

"Neither did I," Hatch said, glaring at Mrs. Jerome.

Wolfe ignored it. "The message I sent Miss Quon was somewhat different, but that need not concern you. Before I tell you what Mr. Goodwin's information is, I need a few facts from you. For instance, I understand that any of you—including Miss Dickey and Mr. Kiernan, who will probably join us later—could have found an opportunity to put the poison in the bottle. Do any of you challenge that?"

Cherry, Mrs. Jerome, and Leo

all spoke at once. Hatch merely looked sour.

Wolfe showed them a palm. "If you please, I point no finger of accusation at any of you. I merely say that none of you, including Miss Dickey and Mr. Kiernan, can prove that you had no opportunity. Can you?"

"Nuts," Leo Jerome was disgusted. "It was that guy playing Santa Claus. I was with Bottweill and my mother all the time, first in the workshop and then in his office. I can prove *that*."

"But Bottweill is dead," Wolfe reminded him, "and your mother is your mother. Did you go up to the office before them, or did your mother go up a little before you and Bottweill did? Is there acceptable proof that you didn't? The others have the same problem: Miss Quon?"

There was no danger of Cherry's spoiling it. Wolfe had told me what he had told her on the phone: that he had made a plan which he thought she would find satisfactory, and if she came at a quarter past six she would see it work. She had kept her eyes fixed on him ever since he entered. Now she chirped, "If you mean I can't prove I wasn't in the office alone yesterday, no, I can't."

"Mr. Hatch?"

"I didn't come here to prove anything. I told you what I came for. What has Goodwin got?"

"We'll get to that. A few more facts first. Mrs. Jerome, when did you learn that Bottweill had decided to marry Miss Quon?"

Leo shouted, "No!" but his mother was too busy staring at Wolfe to hear him. "What?" she croaked. Then she found her voice. "Kurt marry *her*? That little strumpet?"

Cherry didn't move a muscle, her eyes still on Wolfe.

"This is wonderful!" Leo said. "This is marvelous!"

"Not so d a m n wonderful," Emil Hatch declared. "I get the idea, Wolfe. Goodwin hasn't got any information, and neither have you. Why you wanted to get us together and start us clawing at each other, I don't see that, I don't know why you're interested, but maybe I'll find out if I give you a hand. This crowd has produced as fine a collection of venom as you could find. Maybe we all put poison in the bottle and that's why it was such a big dose."

"If it's true that Kurt had decided to marry Cherry, and Al Kiernan knew it, that would have done it. Al would have killed a hundred Kurts if it would get him Cherry. If Mrs. Jerome knew it, I think she would have gone for Cherry instead of Kurt, but maybe she figured there would soon be another one and she might as well settle it for good. As for Leo, I think he rather liked Kurt, but

what can you expect? Kurt was milking mama of the pile. Leo hoped to get some day, and I suspect that the pile is not all it's supposed to be. Actually—”

He stopped, and I left my chair. Leo was on his way up, obviously with the intention of plugging the creative artist. I moved to head him off, and at the same instant I gave him a shove and his mother jerked at his coattail. That not only halted him but nearly upset him, and with my other hand I steered him back onto his chair and then stood beside him.

Hatch inquired, “Shall I go on?”

“By all means,” Wolfe said.

“Actually, though, Cherry would seem to be the most likely. She has the best brain of the lot and by far the strongest will. But I understand that while she says Kurt was going to marry her, Margot claims that he was going to marry *her*. Of course, that complicates it, and a n y w a y Margot would be my second choice. Margot has more than her share of the kind of pride that is only skin deep and therefore can't stand a scratch. If Kurt did decide to marry Cherry and told Margot so, he was even a bigger imbecile than I thought he was.”

“Which brings us to me. I am in a class by myself. I despise all of them. If I had decided to take to poison I would have put it in the champagne as well as

the Pernod, and I would have drunk vodka, which I prefer—and by the way, on that table is a bottle with the Korbeloff vodka label. I haven't had Korbeloff for fifteen years. Is it real?”

“It is, Archie?”

Serving liquid refreshment to a group of invited guests can be a pleasant chore, but it wasn't that time. When I asked Mrs. Jerome to name it she only glowered at me, but by the time I had filled Cherry's order for Scotch and soda, and supplied Hatch with a liberal dose of Korbeloff, no dilution, and Leo had said he would take bourbon and water, his mother muttered that she would have that too.

As I was pouring the bourbon I wondered where we would go from there. It looked as if the time had come for Wolfe to pass on the information which I felt I must give the police without delay, which made it difficult because I didn't have any. That had been fine for bait to get them there, but what now?

I suppose Wolfe would have held them somehow, but he didn't have to. He had rung for beer, and Fritz had brought it and was putting the tray on his desk when the doorbell rang. I handed Leo his bourbon and water and went to the hall. Out on the stoop, with his big round face nearly touching the glass, was Inspector Cramer of Homicide.

Wolfe had told me enough, before the company came, to give me a general idea of the program, so the sight of Cramer, just Cramer, was a letdown. But as I went down the hall other figures appeared, none of them strangers, and that looked better. In fact, it looked fine.

I swung the door wide and in they came—Cramer, then Saul Panzer, then Margot Dickey, then Alfred Kiernan, and, bringing up the rear, Sergeant Purley Stebbins. By the time I had the door closed and bolted they had their coats off, including Cramer, and it was also fine to see that he expected to stay a while. Ordinarily, once in, he marches down the hall and into the office without ceremony, but that time he waved the others ahead, including me, and he and Stebbins came last, herding us in.

Crossing the sill, I stepped aside for the pleasure of seeing his face when his eyes lit on those already there and the empty chairs waiting. Undoubtedly, he had expected to find Wolfe alone, reading a book. He came in two paces, glared around, fastened the glare on Wolfe, and barked, "What's all this?"

"I was expecting you," Wolfe said politely. "Miss Quon, if you don't mind moving, Mr. Cramer likes that chair. Good evening, Miss Dickey. Mr. Kiernan, Mr. Stebbins. If you will all be seated—":

"Panzer!" Cramer barked. Saul, who had started for a chair in the rear, stopped, and turned.

"I'm running this," Cramer declared. "Panzer, you're under arrest and you'll stay with Stebbins and keep your mouth shut."

"No," Wolfe said sharply. "If he's under arrest take him out of here. You are not running this, not, in my house! If you have warrants for anyone present, take them and leave these premises. Would you bulldoze me, Mr. Cramer? You should know better."

That was the point, Cramer did know him. There was the stage, all set. There were Mrs. Jerome and Leo and Cherry and Emil Hatch, and the empty chairs, and above all, there was the fact that he had been expected. He wouldn't have taken Wolfe's word for that; he wouldn't have taken Wolfe's word for anything; but whenever he appeared on our stoop *not* expected I always left the chain-bolt on until he had stated his business and I had reported to Wolfe. And if he had been expected there was no telling what Wolfe had ready to spring. So Cramer gave up the bark and merely growled, "I want to talk with you."

"Certainly." Wolfe indicated the red leather chair, which Cherry had vacated. "Be seated."

"Not here. Alone."

Wolfe shook his head. "It

would be a waste of time. This way is better and quicker. You know quite well, sir, it was a mistake to barge in here and roar at me that you are running my house. Either go, with whomever you can lawfully take, or sit down while I tell you who killed Kurt Bottweill." Wolfe wiggled a finger. "Your chair."

Cramer's round red face had been redder than normal from the outside cold, and now was redder still. He glanced around, compressed his lips until he didn't have any, went to the red leather chair, and sat.

Wolfe sent his eyes around as I circled to my desk. Saul had got to a chair in the rear after all, but Stebbins had too and was at his elbow. Margot had passed in front of the Jeromes and Emil Hatch to get to the chair at the end nearest me, and Cherry and Al Kiernan were at the other end, a little back of the others. Hatch had finished his Korbeloff and put the glass on the floor, but Cherry and the Jeromes were hanging on to their tall ones.

Wolfe's eyes came to rest on Cramer and he spoke. "I must confess that I stretched it a little. I can't tell you, at the moment, who killed Bottweill; I have only a supposition; but soon I can, and will. First some facts for you. I assume you know that for the past two months Mr. Goodwin has been seeing something of Miss

Dickey. He says she dances well."

"Yeah," Cramer's voice came over sandpaper of the roughest grit. "You can save that for later. I want to know if you sent Panzer to meet—"

Wolfe cut him off. "You will. I'm headed for that. But you may prefer this first-hand. Archie, if you please. What Miss Dickey asked you to do last Monday evening, and what happened."

I cleared my throat. "We were dancing at the Flamingo Club. She said Bottweill had been telling her for a year that he would marry her next week, but next week never came, and she was going to have a showdown with him. She asked me to get a blank marriage license and fill it out for her and me and give it to her, and she would show it to Bottweill and tell him now or never. I got the blank on Tuesday, and filled it in, and Wednesday I gave it to her."

I stopped. Wolfe prompted me. "And yesterday afternoon?"

"She told me that the license trick had worked perfectly. That was about a minute before Bottweill entered the studio. I said in my statement to the District Attorney that she told me Bottweill was going to marry her, but I didn't mention the license. It was immaterial."

"Did she tell you what had happened to the license?"

So we were emptying the bag.

I nodded. "She said Bottweill had torn it up and put the pieces in the wastebasket by the desk in his office. The night before, Thursday evening."

"And what did you do when you went to the office after Bottweill had died?"

"I dumped the wastebasket and put the stuff back in it, piece by piece. No part of the license was there."

"You made sure of that?"

"Yes."

Wolfe left me and asked Cramer, "Any questions?"

"No. He lied in his statement. I'll attend to that later. What I want—"

Margot Dickey blurted, "Then Cherry took it!" She craned her neck to see across the others. "You took it, you slut!"

"I did not." The steel was in Cherry's chirp again. Her eyes didn't leave Wolfe, and she told him, "I'm not going to wait any longer—"

"Miss Quon!" he snapped. "I'm doing this." He returned to Cramer. "Now another fact. Yesterday I had a luncheon appointment with Mr. Bottweill at Rusterman's restaurant. He had once dined at my table and wished to reciprocate. Shortly before I left to keep the appointment he phoned to ask me to do him a favor. He said he was extremely busy and might be a few minutes late, and he needed a pair of

white cotton gloves, medium size, for a man, and would I stop at some shop on the way and get them. It struck me as a peculiar request, but he was a peculiar man. Since Mr. Goodwin had chores to do, and I will not ride in taxicabs if there is any alternative, I had engaged a car at Baxter's, and the chauffeur recommended a shop on Eighth Avenue between Thirty-ninth and Fortieth Streets. We stopped there and I bought white gloves."

Cramer's eyes were such narrow slits that none of the blue-gray showed. He wasn't buying any part of it, which was unjustified, since some of it was true.

Wolfe went on. "At the lunch table I gave the gloves to Mr. Bottweill, and he explained, somewhat vaguely, what he wanted them for. I gathered that he had taken pity on some vagabond he had seen on a park bench and had hired him to serve refreshments at his office party, costumed as Santa Claus, and had decided that the only way to make his hands presentable was to have him wear gloves. You shake your head, Mr. Cramer?"

"You're damn right I do. You would have reported that. No reason on earth not to. Go ahead and finish."

"I'll finish this first. I didn't report it because I thought you would find the murderer without it. It was practically certain that

the vagabond had merely skedaddled out of fright, since he couldn't possibly have known of the jar of poison in the workshop, not to mention other considerations. And as you know, I have a strong aversion to involvement in matters where I have no concern or interest. You can of course check this—with the staff at Rusterman's, my presence there with Mr. Bottweill, and with the chauffeur, my conferring with him about the gloves and our stopping at the shop to buy them."

"You're reporting it now."

"I am indeed." Wolfe was unruffled. "Because I understood from Mr. Goodwin that you were extending and intensifying your search for the man who was there as Santa Claus, and with your army and your resources it probably wouldn't take you long when the holiday had ended to learn where the gloves were bought and get a description of the man who bought them. My physique is not unique, but it is—uncommon, and the only question was how long it would take you to get to me, and then I would be under inquisition. Obviously, I had to report the episode to you and suffer your rebuke for not reporting it earlier, but I wanted to make it as tolerable as possible. I had one big advantage: I knew that the man who acted Santa Claus was almost certainly not the murderer,

and I decided to use it. I needed first to have a talk with one of those people, and I did so, with Miss Quon, who came here last evening."

"Why Miss Quon?"

Wolfe turned a hand over. "When I have finished you can decide whether such details are important. With her I discussed her associates at that place and their relationships, and I became satisfied that Bottweill had, in fact, decided to marry her. That was all. You can also decide later whether it is worthwhile to ask her to corroborate that, and I have no doubt she will."

He was looking at Cherry, of course, for any sign of danger. She had started to blurt it out once, and might again. But, meeting his gaze, she didn't move a muscle.

Wolfe returned to Cramer. "This morning I acted. Mr. Goodwin was absent, at the District Attorney's office, so I called in Mr. Panzer. After spending an hour with me here he went to do some errands. The first one was to learn whether Bottweill's wastebasket had been emptied since his conversation with Miss Dickey in his office Thursday evening. As you know, Mr. Panzer is highly compétent. Through Miss Quon he got the name and address of the cleaning woman, found her, talked with her, and was told that the

wastebasket had been emptied at about six o'clock Thursday afternoon. Meanwhile I—”

“Cherry took it—the pieces,” Margot said.

Wolfe ignored her. “Meanwhile, I was phoning everyone concerned—Mrs. Jerome and her son, Miss Dickey, Miss Quon, Mr. Hatch, and Mr. Kiernan—and inviting them to come here for a conference at six fifteen. I told them that Mr. Goodwin had information which he intended to give the police, which was not true, and that I thought it best to discuss it first with them.”

“I told you so,” Hatch muttered.

Wolfe ignored him too. “Mr. Panzer's second errand, or series of errands, was the delivery of some messages. He had written them in longhand, at my dictation here this morning, on plain sheets of paper, and had addressed plain envelopes. They were identical and ran as follows:

“When I was there yesterday putting on my costume, I saw you through a crack in the door and I saw what you did. Do you want me to tell the cops? Be at Grand Central information booth, upper level, at 6:30 today. I'll come up to you and say, ‘Saint Nick.’”

“By God,” Cramer said, “you admit it.”

Wolfe nodded. “I proclaim it. The messages were signed ‘Santa Claus.’ Mr. Panzer accompanied the messenger who took them to the persons I have named, and made sure they were delivered. They were not so much shots at random as they may appear. If one of those people had killed Bottweill it was extremely likely that the poison had been put in the bottle while the vagabond was donning the Santa Claus costume; Miss Quon had told me, as no doubt she has told you, that Bottweill invariably took a drink of Pernod when he returned from lunch; and, since the appearance of Santa Claus at the party had been a surprise to all of them, and none of them knew who he was, it was highly probable that the murderer would believe he had been observed and would be irresistibly impelled to meet the writer of the message. So it was a reasonable assumption that one of the shots would reach its target. The question was, which one?”

Wolfe stopped to pour beer. He did pour it, but I suspected that what he really stopped for was to offer an opening for comment or protest. No one had any, not even Cramer. They all just sat and gazed at him. I was thinking that he had neatly skipped one detail: that the message from Santa Claus had not gone to Cherry Quon. She knew too much about him.

Wolfe put the bottle down and turned to go on to Cramer. "There was the possibility, of course, that more than one of them would go to you with the message, but even if you decided, because it had been sent to more than one, that it was some hoax, you would want to know who perpetrated it, and you would send one of them to the rendezvous under surveillance. Any one or more, excepting the murderer, might go to you, or none might; and surely only the murderer would go to the rendezvous without first consulting you. So if one of those six people was guilty, and if it had been possible for Santa Claus to observe him, disclosure seemed next to certain. Saul, you may now report. What happened? You were near the information booth shortly before six thirty?"

Necks were twisted for a view of Saul Panzer. He nodded. "Yes, sir. At six twenty. Within three minutes I had recognized three Homicide men scattered around in different spots. I don't know if they recognized me or not. At six twenty-eight I saw Alfred Kiernan walk up near the booth and stand there, about ten feet away from it. I was just about to go and speak to him when I saw Margot Dickey coming up from the Forty-second Street side. She approached to within thirty feet of the booth and stood looking around.

"Following your instructions in case more than one of them appeared and Miss Dickey was one of them, I went to her and said, 'Saint Nick.' She said, 'Who are you and what do you want?' I said, 'Excuse me, I'll be right back,' and went over to Alfred Kiernan and said to him, 'Saint Nick.' As soon as I said that he raised a hand to his ear, and then here they came, the three I had recognized and two more, and then Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Stebbins. I was afraid Miss Dickey would run, and she did start to, but they had seen me speak to her, and two of them stopped her."

Saul halted because of an interruption. Purley Stebbins, seated next to him, got up and stepped over to Margot Dickey and stood there behind her chair. To me it seemed unnecessary, since I was sitting not much more than arm's length from her and might have been trusted to grab her if she tried to start anything; but Purley is never very considerate of other people's feelings, especially mine.

Saul resumed, "Naturally it was Miss Dickey I was interested in, since they had moved in on a signal from Kiernan. But they had her, so that was okay. They took us to a room back of the parcel room and started in on me, and I followed your instructions. I told them I would answer no questions, would say nothing whatever;

except in the presence of Nero Wolfe, because I was acting under your orders. When they saw I meant it they took us out to two police cars and brought us here. Anything else?"

"No," Wolfe told him. "Satisfactory." He turned to Cramer. "I assume Mr. Panzer is correct in concluding that Mr. Kiernan gave your men a signal. So Mr. Kiernan had gone to you with the message?"

"Yes." Cramer had taken a cigar from his pocket and was squeezing it in his hand. He does that sometimes when he would like to squeeze Wolfe's throat instead. "So had Mrs. Jerome, her son, and Hatch."

"But Miss Dickey hadn't?"

"No. Neither had Miss Quon."

"Miss Quon was probably reluctant, understandably. She told me last evening that the police idea of Orientals is very primitive. As for Miss Dickey, I may say that I am not surprised. For a reason that does not concern you, I am even a little gratified. I have told you that she told Mr. Goodwin that Bottweill had torn up the marriage license and put the pieces in his wastebasket, and they weren't there when Mr. Goodwin looked for them, and the wastebasket hadn't been emptied since early Thursday evening. It was difficult to conceive a reason for anyone to fish around in the wastebasket

to remove those pieces, so presumably Miss Dickey lied; and if she lied about the license, the rest of what she told Mr. Goodwin was under suspicion."

Wolfe upturned a palm. "Why would she tell him that Bottweill was going to marry her if it wasn't true? Surely a stupid thing to do, since he would inevitably learn the truth. But it wasn't so stupid if she knew that Bottweill would soon die; indeed, it was far from stupid if she had already put the poison in the bottle; it would purge her of motive, or at least help. It was a fair surmise that at their meeting in his office Thursday evening Bottweill had told her, not that he would marry her, but that he had decided to marry Miss Quon, and she decided to kill him and proceeded to do so. And it must be admitted that she would probably never have been exposed but for the complications injected by Santa Claus and my resulting intervention. Have you any comment, Miss Dickey?"

Cramer left his chair, commanding her, "Don't answer! I'm running this now." But she spoke.

"Cherry took those pieces from the wastebasket! She did it! She killed him!"

She started up, but Purley had her arm and Cramer told her, moving for her, "She didn't go to meet a blackmailer, and you did. Look in her bag, Purley."

Cherry Quon was back in the red leather chair. The others had gone, and she and Wolfe and I were alone. They hadn't put cuffs on Margot Dickey, but Purley had kept hold of her arm as they crossed the threshold, with Cramer right behind. Saul Panzer, no longer in custody, had gone along by request.

Mrs. Jerome and Leo had been the first to leave. Kiernan had asked Cherry if he could take her home, but Wolfe had said no, he wanted to speak with her privately, and Kiernan and Hatch had left together, which showed a fine Christmas spirit, since Hatch had made no exceptions when he said he despised all of them.

Cherry was on the edge of the chair, spine straight, hands together in her lap. "You didn't do it the way I said," she chirped, without steel.

"No," Wolfe agreed, "but I did it." He was curt. "You ignored one complication—the possibility that you had killed Bottweill yourself. I didn't, I assure you. I couldn't very well send you one of the notes from Santa Claus, under the circumstances; but if those notes had flushed no prey, if none of them had gone to the rendezvous without first notifying the police, I would have assumed that you were guilty and would have proceeded to expose you. How, I don't know; I let that

wait on the event; and now that Miss Dickey has taken the bait and betrayed herself it doesn't matter."

Her eyes had widened. "You really thought I might have killed Kurt?"

"Certainly. A woman capable of trying to blackmail me to manufacture evidence of murder would be capable of anything. And, speaking of evidence, while there can be no certainty about a jury's decision when a personable young woman is on trial for murder, now that Miss Dickey is manifestly guilty you may be sure that Mr. Cramer will dig up all he can get, and there should be enough. That brings me to the point I wanted to speak about. In the quest for evidence you will all be questioned, exhaustively and repeatedly—"

"We wouldn't," Cherry put in, "if you had done it the way I said." That would have been proof."

"I preferred my way." Wolfe, having a point to make, was controlling himself. "It will be an ordeal for you. They will question you at length about your talk with Bottweill yesterday morning at breakfast, wanting to know all that he said about his meeting with Miss Dickey in his office Thursday evening, and under the pressure of inquisition you might inadvertently let something slip regarding what he told you about

Santa Claus. If you do they will certainly follow it up.

"I strongly advise you to avoid making such a slip. Even if they believe you, the identity of Santa Claus is no longer important, since they have the murderer, and if they come to me with such a tale I'll have no great difficulty dealing with it."

He turned a hand over. "And in the end they probably won't believe you. They'll think you invented it for some cunning and obscure purpose—as you say, you are an Oriental—and all you would get for it would be more questions. They might even suspect that you were somehow involved in the murder itself. They are quite capable of unreasonable suspicions. So I suggest these considerations as much on your behalf as on mine. I think you will be wise to forget about Santa Claus."

She was eyeing him, straight and steady. "I like to be wise," she said.

"I'm sure you do, Miss Quon."

"I still think you should have done it my way, but it's done now. Is that all?"

He nodded. "That's all."

She looked at me, and it took a second for me to realize that she was smiling at me. I thought it wouldn't hurt to smile back, and did. She left the chair and came to me, extending a hand, and I arose and took it. She looked up at me.

"I would like to shake hands with Mr. Wolfe, but I know he doesn't like to shake hands. You know, Mr. Goodwin, it must be a very great pleasure to work for a man as clever as Mr. Wolfe. So extremely clever. It has been very exciting to be here. Now I say goodbye."

She turned and went.



# Gerald Kersh

## Honor Among Thieves

*The inkredible Karmesin, you will recall, is either the greatest criminal or the greatest liar of his time. Whichever (and we are not always sure!), the adversary of the Klever Karmesin in "Honor Among Thieves" is a mastermind named Carfax. Gerald Kersh assured us that the character of "Carfax" was based on a real-life person—with name changed, of course. To quote Mr. Kersh: "Conan Doyle thought he had an archvillain in Professor Moriarty, but compared with Carfax, Moriarty was a mere petty larcenist. In real life Carfax was vastly larger than he is in fiction. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that a great military general, both strategic and tactical, was lost in the real-life Carfax."*

*Quoting Mr. Kersh further: "Carfax's ramifications were fantastic. One would not be going too far to classify him as a criminal genius. For example: You remember the Yugoslavian who ran a factory for the manufacture of gold coins? He was merely one of Carfax's hired help. Carfax stole the bullion and shipped it to the factory. There it was minted, with gold added—so that the gold content of Carfax's coins gave better value than those of the official mint! His ten-dollar gold piece was worth ten dollars sixty; his pound, twenty-four shillings. The law couldn't touch him!" . . . But Carfax, the colossal Carfax, was no match for the Kolossal Karmesin . . .*

### Criminal: KARMESIN

**I**T WAS A NOTABLE CRIMINAL indeed that caused Karmesin to raise an eyebrow or twitch his mustache—so when I said that a man named Carfax had never been caught, there occurred a certain convulsion in the features

of Karmesin. First, his eyebrows went up and his mustache came down; next, his eyebrows leveled themselves and his mustache spread itself; then he laughed. And when Karmesin laughed, it was a sort of internecine incident:

everything shook—yet he made little sound.

"Poor Carfax!" said Karmesin.

"Not so poor," I said. "Carfax got away with millions. Scotland Yard knows all about it—he fenced, fiddled, and organized. He rides about in a super-Rolls. Admit, Karmesin, that he must have made more than a couple of millions, and was never caught—"

"Never what? Never prosecuted, you mean," said Karmesin. "Neither was I. But *caught* in the colloquial sense of the term? There I beg to differ." And locking his enormous hands, glaring at me under his portentous eyebrows and making full play of his plumlike eyes, he went on, "Carfax's liquid assets were two million, five hundred and thirty thousand, seven hundred pounds in bullion, American dollars, and Swiss francs. I happen to know.

"But his fortune is gone, and his prestige is gone, and worst of all, he has lost face in his own filthy milieu. Once upon a time anyone who took a shilling from Carfax would be found at ebbtide in the Thames, in the region of Greenwich, in an advanced state of decomposition. Now, he could not even get your arm broken... Why, I took a fortune off him as easily—at least with less outcry—as one might take a sugarstick from a child."

"It was in the autumn of the year 1945—or was it 1955?—and

my peregrinations had taken me to a certain hotel not far from Hyde Park, which was a most peculiar hangout of black marketeers, visiting film stars, and all that. Case in point: once, in the lounge, a harassed physician said to me, 'I have seven hundred and fifty cases of malaria—' whereupon a man took him aside and asked, 'How much a bottle?'

"Because, although the war was over, there was in the civilian population something worse—I mean, a hangover of war: the morning after is always worse than the night before. Whereas in wartime your black marketeers had tended to load, and overload, now they felt certain misgivings.

"I daresay you know there was a Black Exchange in coupons, and so forth. In the underworld it was a bull market today and a bear market tomorrow—an awkward time for a hard-working petty criminal, or spiv, to be operating. For at any moment the Chancellor of the Exchequer might declare such-and-such an item, in which some spiv had invested a large sum of money, *off the ration*.

"To proceed: I was in the bar of this certain hotel—let us call it the Barchester—drinking a little glass of sound brandy, when there came to my nostrils, which are sensitive at the best of times, an unmistakable odor which I challenge the *perfumiers* of the world to duplicate: the odor of

a 'skate's eyeball.' In case you want to try it, put a pickled onion in neat Holland's gin and beer, and rinse and swallow. This, on the breath of a man who is afraid of dentists, will work it out.

"I lit a cigar and without turning my head I said 'Carfax! Sit down. Stop breathing down my neck or I'll be compelled to go upstairs for a bath and a clean collar.'" . . .

So Carfax sat down and offered me a drink (continued Karmesin), but when I said that this was my table and would he please order what he wanted—as if I did not know—he called for a wineglassful of Holland's gin, and produced from one of his pockets a little jar of pickled onions.

I said to him, "If you have anything to tell me, Carfax, please be good enough to turn your chair sideways and say it out of the other corner of your mouth."

He did nothing of the sort. Instead, he made me a kind of stream-of-consciousness, which ran somewhat as follows: "Karmesin, you're the one man in the world I'd cut my right hand off to see. My left, also . . . Karmesin, I know the boys, I've known 'em since Eddie Guérin escaped from Devil's Island, but never no one I could honestly trust. Of all the tealeafs I ever met, only you can work alone—".

'Tealeaf,' I need scarcely tell you, my young friend, is cant for 'thief.' Try as he might, this fellow Carfax could not refrain from being offensive; everybody knows that I disapprove of slang. However, keeping a smokescreen between myself and his skate's eyeball, I said nothing while Carfax went on.

"Yes, there's the trouble with the wide boys—they got to have a pal. And believe me, Karmesin, it's been the downfall of too many. But sometimes a one-feller kind of style gets a bloke in a jam, if you get what I mean, and it's then he needs a pal—for a consideration, mind you, for a consideration which is considerable . . ."

He had another skate's eyeball and added, "I'm not much to look at, perhaps."

"Perhaps?" I said. "Perhaps you think it pays dividends to put my legs under the same table with you? Carfax, I know that you can whistle up a mad-doggery of slashers, but I have not been afraid of the most desperate scum on earth from here to Marseilles, from Marseilles to Bucharest, from Bucharest to Hong Kong, and—" But he did not seem to hear me.

"Now I'm the boss, I'm like a king," he said, "but who can I trust? For little jobs, sure, I got a decent bunch of boys. They'd swing for anybody I put

the finger on, and never squeal! Much good it'd do them if they did, because the world is a little place and—get what I mean?—they wouldn't die of old age. You can trust a bloke with your life, you can trust a bloke with your wife, but where will you find a bloke you can trust with money?"

I said, "Yes, my friend. There's the point."

"Believe me," said Carfax, "a gentleman is bloody hard to find—I don't mean somebody that's been to Oxford and Cambridge, because they're the worst of the lot; and I don't mean somebody that talks with his mouth full of hot potatoes like you, because they're two a penny and always turn yellor in the end. What I mean is, one o' Nature's gentlemen, like me!"

He fixed another skater's eyeball, and went on, "These Mayfair boys think they're gentlemen because they get their suits made in Savile Row. La-de-da! My boys, I had 'em outfitted during the war by a tailor in Black Lion Yard, and—"

I said "He, I happen to know, Carfax, made them a secret lining and—"

"That's right. Every one of 'em could carry 24,000 clothes coupons, food coupons, and whatnot, and every one of 'em was dressed smart. Up to a point you can trust a man—say, 24,000 coupons

at a couple of shillings apiece; deduct expenses, and it's only a matter of a few hundred pounds. Yes? All right. But—"

I said, "I know your problem, Carfax, but before I offer an opinion I will thank you for a consultant's fee: one hundred pounds, in one-pound notes." He affected not to hear, so I added, "What about the matter of orange-concentrate during the war?"

He said, "One four-ounce rationed bottle is allowed to a sixteen-pound baby. Dilute, get your bottles, and it's 'Genuine' orange juice, five shillings a go... What are you looking at me like that for? You're an educated man—what's Economics? Taking advantage of a necessity—in other words, filling up a hole. That's Economics. Strike me blind, but if I'd been in a legitimate way of business I might have been in the Cabinet by now!"

"But under current circumstances, you are a victim of bureaucracy?" I said.

"Listen, Karmesin, I had an Organization tight as a drum and a mob clean as a whistle; that's agreed. Comes something ten times tighter—I mean to say, we live under a sort of criminal system. Say, for example, that you have put aside a few thousand pounds, and say, for example, that I get wind of it and split. What happens? I get a reward as Common Informer. If that isn't an

organized stool pigeon, what is?"

I repeated, "One hundred pounds fee, Carfax, before I express—"

"Now I've got as lovely a bunch of boys as you could meet within spitting distance on a dusty day; but I pay 'em by the job, and provide bail when necessary. Karmesin, they love me like a father, and whatnot. I taught 'em all they know. They are as ignorant as dirt. Play both ends against the middle—that's Carfax's lay. Every one of 'em watches the other like a cat watches a mouse—but there's only two boys I can trust, my two sons. If anything happens to me they inherit, through their mother. Karmesin, I'm getting on in years, and in the middle of the night I get a feeling like something's pressing exactly where you give a man the boot—" he pointed to his solar plexus "—so the little bit I saved up, the actuaries are after. They're scratching, Karmesin, they're digging."

"Little bit?" I said. "To be specific, Carfax, the sum must be in the neighborhood of—"

"Look, Karmesin, I'll tell you because it's no secret—" his voice was hoarse as he explained "—but since 1939 I've stacked up a pile of dosh, ónly—"

"Only you dare not bank it, and you dare not invest it," I said. "Is that not so?"

"Why, the police of two continents couldn't put salt on my tail," he said. "The Government, left alone—you can fiddle your way through—but the Yanks are nibbling at 'em. Something to do with a few million cartons of P-X cigarettes before D-Day. Well, I mean to say! You know I switched trucks and lifted half a million pounds in Bank of England bullion from the airport, shipped it to Yugoslavia, and had it minted into genuine coins, which I shipped back. The overhead was something terrible, but *that* I got away with. Murder I can get away with—put it like this: dead men tell no tales.

"Ah, you can hide anything you like, except money. Not to talk shop, I daresay I could be hung many times over and police know it, but they can't make a case against me—not a tittle o' evidence. I've been grilled off and on for the past forty years by the cops, in the days when they were free with their hands too, but I never came across anything so dastardly cruel as the actuaries—the you-know-who. Kind of put yourself in my position. I've got a little bit o' property—put yourself in my position . . ."

Knowing with whom I was dealing, I said, "For the third and last time, Carfax—one hundred pounds, in one-pound notes."

As I expected, he said, "I could

run to twenty-five pounds—"

Whereupon, to his infinite astonishment, I replied, "Very well, Carfax, very well."

Then, having put the money in my pocket, I summed up: "Carfax, that you are a most notorious and sickening son of a dog is common knowledge in heaven and on earth. If you think you fool me for one instant, you never made a greater mistake in your misspent life. Long before the war brought the Yanks here or created shortages so that you could become one of the ringleaders of the Black Market, you were a rich man. Friend Carfax, I know you to be fence of thirty to forty years standing. What do you take me for? The little boy you pushed through the fanlight of a bank window and rewarded with a few pieces of silver?"

"The kid done it of his own free will," said Carfax.

"After you had shown him a razor, Sir, I am no such child. As I calculate it, you have accumulated—you were always a mean creature—something in the region of three million pounds, and now the most terrifying body of men in the world is closing in on you. Never mind Scotland Yard, never mind M.I.5, never mind Interpol—commend me, brother, to Inland Revenue, your bugbear. If you declare your earnings or gains, about 99 per

cent will be forfeited. So what you want me to do is clear the way for you to reinvest at a high profit your illicit fortune of—"

Carfax interjected: "You exaggerate the sum, you know."

"I was not born yesterday," I proceeded. "All you can do with your miserable money is bury it in a hole in the ground. But while you might be content with that, your wife would certainly not. Meantime, you are watched, and what you have you dare not spend."

"It's true the Inland Revenue has got narks and informers everywhere," said Carfax.

"In fine, you want an outlet for your money?" I persisted.

"Well, all right."

"What outlet?" I asked. "Where an outlet? Carfax, it is my business to know what goes on in the world. Your only outlet is the United States of America. Your capital is in mixed currency, jewelry, and bullion—"

"Is it?" said Carfax.

I replied, "Now look here, Carfax, having taken your twenty-five pounds I will give you the general line. Point One: 'Good as gold' used to be a notable phrase in England, but 'gold' in England is no longer that good—brother, you wouldn't get three jumps away with your bullion. Point Two: Speaking of well-known jewelry, you have Lady Elphick's diamonds, worth

on the open market a matter of two hundred thousand pounds. Point Three: You played the race course with Straight-as-a-Gun Ziggy, and came out with a fat profit—don't deny it, Carfax, I know you paid Ziggy two thousand five hundred pounds for 'fixing.' Right?

"To go on," I continued, "you've got foreign currency which is more than your liberty is worth to push in the market. No, sir, you've got to get that load to France, and *then* to the United States. Contradict me if you dare!"

Carfax said, "Well, I wouldn't mind getting the stuff across the Channel and make a deal in France, if you get what I mean?"

"Yes, Carfax, you can change it into something no larger than four volumes of the works of Charles Dickens," I said. "And these you can get to America by one courier or another, and the contents you already know where to flog in that country." And I knew perfectly well, of course, what he would exchange his fortune for: four hollow volumes full of heroin, cocaine, and morphine. So I added, "H, C, and M?"

"A word to the wise is sufficient," said Carfax. "Do you want to cooperate?"

"On a percentage basis, naturally," I said.

"And what would you call a

percentage basis?" he asked.

"My dear Carfax, I am a man of business. First of all, there is a fee for transportation to France in which I include certain actuarial risks: you must assume, Carfax, that my income is not low, and you must also assume that, if anything goes wrong, I am liable as an accessory to about ten years in prison. I am afraid that I must insist on twenty thousand pounds in advance, since you are carrying about three million. Otherwise, no deal."

"Karmesin, you're off your rocker! Call it ten thousand, and we'll discuss."

"Go to the devil," I said.

We settled for £15,000—fool though Carfax was; he knew how to make a bargain.

He said, "How do we get the stuff over? And how do I get back? Little boat?"

"Plane," I said: "I have a good clean transport. I can drop you within twenty miles of Paris, put you in a car, bag and baggage, and... This is important: you must tell me how long you are likely to keep me waiting."

"A matter of four hours. But where's your plane?"

"Between Bedford and Northampton. Private airfield," I said. "You will come with me by train, Carfax. If I guess rightly, one or two of your young men will be following by car—or your two sons, perhaps?"

Carfax said, "The trouble is, every dirty yobbo thinks, already, he's an executive—you can't spit on a foggy night without hitting an Al Capone. Believe me, I know. Like I said, there's only two boys in the world—apart from yourself—that I trust, and they are my sons. And they don't trust each other... Who's the pilot?"

Now my pilot was a discreet fellow, an ex-night-fighter who had made himself a marriage, got himself a little boy, and was trying to get a job doing stunts for the movies. His name was Flight Lieutenant Landry; he could not get a position in civil aviation because of honorable injuries.

However, I said, "Carfax the least said the better. We have all fallen into the soup in our time. In any case, I'll stand by."

He said, "I'll bet you will. But come on now, fair play, eh? You'll stand by me, but a couple of my boys will stand by you, Karmesin. I ought to warn you that I arm 'em with—"

"Save your breath which, I may say, is redolent. You arm your boys with .25 automatics loaded with steel-jacketed bullets. They make little noises, but have penetrative power—as witness the case of Happy Medium Michaelson, who weighed two hundred and sixty pounds. Carfax, there is nothing you can tell me about yourself that I do not know."

Carfax said grudgingly, "This I know. But you get your pay only when I'm safe back in England."

"With your little parcels? Very well, Carfax—not that I approve of what the French call *stupéfiants*, and the English call narcotics."

He said, "Supply and demand. We've all got to fiddle a little—I mean to say, if I didn't somebody else would... What more do you want?"

"Nothing more," I said. "Three days from now I will pick you up at Euston in time for the seven o'clock train—I have not the slightest doubt that a couple of your young men will be following in the souped-up Cadillac?"

"How did you know it was a Cadillac?"

Disdaining to reply, I said, "Seven o'clock Thursday evening, at Euston station, Carfax, and you have my word on it that you will be delivered safe on English soil, with nothing to embarrass you."

"I'd better be, you know." "Meet me, then, and we'll take off from my private airport."

Carfax said, "I've got to have a hand with me, Karmesin, because—not to lie to you—I'm carrying weight, and I've got a bit of the old blood pressure. The buzzing, if you get what I mean, between the ears and up the back of the neck—"

I said, "Enough! Thursday."

"Ah, but you don't get a penny, you know, until I'm safe back?"

I said, "This has already been discussed. Good evening."

So Carfax went his way and I went mine, and as I walked—always with an object in view—I argued with myself, as follows: Take this creature: he is almost too clever to live. Who is the greatest fool in the world? Why, the cleverest, because he grows to be the most vain . . .

Then I went to one of those Fun Fairs, one of those places where people flirt with death. I say "flirt" advisedly, because there is no intention of a consummation. The same thing happens in love-making, with which I am not concerned this past forty years—there are women who, as the saying goes, "tease."

By the same token, there are people who love to tease the Old Man With the Scythe. Thus, the apparently dangerous fun and games—roller coasters and what-not—are vastly popular in these places of amusement. By the same token, too, immense popularity attaches to games where you throw things, fire small arms, and so on.

Now in this particular Fun Fair there was young Flight Lieutenant Landry, who owned a concession. He had been in trouble in his time, and I had helped his mother

a bit—a pound here, a pound there, what's the difference? The boy Landry got into bad company; he got into quite good company a few years later, when he became a night-fighter in the Battle of Britain.

Landry was one of those boys with a peculiar knack for machinery and with a sense of quiet desperation—the two go together. Fearing everything, he set his teeth and feared nothing. He was shot down somewhere and lost an arm. The War being over, I advised him that now was the time for gaiety: in point of fact, I helped him to purchase an old transport plane which, while on the ground, could go through all the gyrations of a night-fighter—at sixpence for two minutes. It was a popular attraction. These flirtations with death at the Fairs! It upset the customers horribly, but they loved it . . .

So I went to Landry and said I wanted a favor, for which I'd be prepared to pay. He said to me, "I owe you plenty of favors, Mr. Karmesin. Don't talk about pay. Name the favor."

Pointing to his machine, I said, "This contraption: it can loop-the-loop, roll, dip, drop, and all that?"

"All that, and tail-spin too."

"Is it transportable, Landry?"

"Oh, yes. I load her on a tractor. She can't fly, you know, but

I can cover the country with the old cow."

I then said, "I don't know what you make a day around here. But I will guarantee you one thousand pounds for twenty-four hours of your time and the use of this lump of ironmongery. Do you happen to have a strong and resolute friend?"

"There's Cheerful Charlie, who helps around the lot—he was my favorite E.R.K. Bit short-sighted, and weighs fourteen stone. Was nearly heavyweight champion of the Air Force, only—you know how it is—couldn't keep his chin down. Stuck his face forward and his neck out. We used to call him the turtle—but game as a pheasant, and will fight like a stag; and what with the beatings he's taken, his face is something to haunt your dreams. But what's the gen? Is it legit?"

"It is not merely legitimate," I said, "it is humanitarian. Bring your machinery and Cheerful Charlie to Nobbut in Northamptonshire. It is a flat piece of country, distinguished only by the fact that the demented poet William Cowper and his pet hare lived nearby; it also is not far from Bedford which, as you know, gave out a slightly deranged tinker named John Bunyan who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

"Arriving at Nobbut, inquire for Karmesin's Field. When you get there, set up this piece of

nonsense, you and your turtle, and wait for me. You will find it best to set up near a prefabricated hut—a Waiting Room—which I'll provide. It is also my intention that you and your turtle carry arms—unloaded. These I have: one, a U.S. Army .45 automatic; the other, an English revolver of the same caliber. Now here is five hundred pounds, and I rely on you, my boy."

Landry did not want the money, but he finally took it and agreed to be with Charlie and his plane at the appointed spot somewhat in advance of the appointed time. There was to be discreet lighting—very discreet. He introduced me to Charlie the Erk, and I could not have wished for a better man. He had a military bearing, but it was at an angle of about thirty degrees, and his ears were thickened. Put yourself in a crate with that man, and you might come out badly; only he was wearing a pair of Army-issue steel-rimmed glasses, and even so he had to get within two feet of an object before he could discern it.

I said to Landry, "You will be pilot, of course—let this one be a steward. Buy him a white jacket—I leave it to you."

So I went back to Carfax and told him to get set. In his usual manner he said, "Karmesin, old cock, in this mob we generally use a .25 automatic with steel-

jacket bullets—but, you're a big fellow, so I'm packing a 9-millimeter Luger."

I replied, "I never carry arms, but if you frighten me to death you will lose your means of transportation. In short, tell it to the Marines, and be ready for the train."

He was worried; and said, "Dog doesn't eat dog."

"There are dogs and dogs," I said.

Please allow me a little psychology: It is not much I ask of life—a little philosophy, a little psychology, with, perhaps, a shot of metaphysics and a dash of bitters that one acquires? I say that this Carfax, the most astute criminal in England, was easier to rob than a baby. Try taking a lollipop from a baby, and it will cry to high heaven: here is holy innocence. Carfax was neither holy nor innocent, so he did not dare to cry.

Also, by the same token, give a child a pistol and he will, bless him, in all innocence, shoot you. So will Carfax—only he must first manufacture an alibi and get you alone in a lonely room and worry about disposing of your remains. Too much detail is tedious—I say, simply, that taking his ill-acquired fortune from the master thief Carfax was far easier than taking a lollipop from a child, as I did once when the child was trying

to swallow the stick—and, believe me, it is easier to rob a bank, and a great deal less messy. To cut it fine, I used a child's trick on this over-subtle mastermind.

We got out to the airfield, if I may so call it, where I had Landry set up that airplane. Rest assured that Carfax was at my elbow and his goons were not far behind. They carried the bullion to the extent of, in troy weight, seven hundred pounds.

Flight Lieutenant Landry was at the controls in a blue cap, and an electric sign flashed on saying: *NO SMOKING. PLEASE ADJUST YOUR SAFETY BELT.* The doors were slammed, the engines turned over, and then the fun began . . .

I suppose you know that you can take just about three minutes of one of these trick airplanes? Try it, I suggest, for two and a half hours, with this piece of engineering performing every known gyration to the thirty-two points of the compass.

I was there for psychological effect. From time to time I shouted, "It looks like we are going into the drink!" At which signal Landry would do a mock nose-dive, a tail-spin, and a sort of belly-roll. The plight of Carfax and Co. was something pitiful to see. From time to time I bellowed warnings about blowing up 'Mae Wests' because we were already in the drink.

Carfax, battered head to toe, begged for mercy after a couple of hours. At a signal from me we looped-the-loop a few more times, bumped in the most sickening manner, then steadied ourselves. Eventually, bump-bump-bump we landed—only, you see, we had never left the ground.

Then we staggered to the prefabricated hut which I had personally adorned inside with French travel posters, a bottle of Armagnac, a copy of *Le Rire*, and a few more artistic touches.

Well, I have never seen a sorrier handful of criminals than Carfax and his boys when they got out of what was once a plane. I said, "Powerful car here. Put the bullion in the boot." So, very unsteadily, they did.

Then I said, "Now, Carfax, I'll trouble you for that canvas belt around your waist. Don't try and pull one of your little guns, because my friends and I carry things of larger caliber. Furthermore, you could not hit the side of a barn at ten feet, so be sensible. Unbuckle, Carfax, and if you pull out the wrong thing, one of us will let you have it in the stomach—which, I believe, is sufficiently empty after your little trip to have room for a few grams of lead. Your boy friends, also, are reeling in circles, while we are steady as stones. Will you have the goodness to unbuckle your belt? Or shall one of my

friends be your *vale t-de-chambre?*"

Carfax said, "Karmesin, I'll get you for this!" But he let fall a canvas belt about twelve inches wide. Landry picked it up and handed it to me—I had to drape it around my shoulders, Carfax was such a big man. Suddenly he whimpered, quite demoralized, "How do we get back to England?"

"You have your passports and some money in your pockets," I said. "Everything else failing, go to the Consulate General and weep. Now, if you take the road straight ahead, bear left, hit the main road for about eight miles, you will find yourself at a perfectly respectable railway station."

"You promised—"

"I promised to land you on British soil," I said, "and so I have. You are equidistant between Bedford and Northampton."

Carfax said in a broken voice, "Karmesin, I'll split fifty-fifty."

I replied, "What kind of fool do you take me for, when I have the whole lot?"

So, while Cheerful Charlie drove the machine back to the Fun Fair on the tractor, Landry drove me at high speed back to London.

On the way I told him: "Apart from what you get, remember that there is a moral in this: a child would not have fallen for this trick, but that corrupt creature

did. It was child's play—which leads me to conclude that, tough as they think they are, a little child can lead them.”

“Oh, well,” said Karmesin, “the proceeds, as I told you, amounted to two million, five hundred and thirty thousand, seven hundred pounds—we will ignore the odd shillings. Every penny of this I gave to the Rehabilitation Fund of Free Europe, deducting for myself only twenty per cent plus out-of-pocket expenses. For my work in this matter I charged nothing.

“And that is why your famous Carfax is now reduced to an endowment policy which, to him, is abject poverty. True, he owns the freehold of his home in

Highgate; but he is reduced to the level of a petty *rentier*, and the cost of living being what it is, he is a poor man.”

Then Karmesin, if not the greatest criminal, at least the greatest and most plausible liar, of his time—perhaps of all time—said, “Carfax has no influence any more, even among those who used to worship him. And upon what did this ‘worship’ depend? Upon the fact that Carfax was safe, that he was rich. It is not for me to moralize, but Riches and Respect go together . . .”

Grinding out a twice-rolled butt under the heel of a well-worn shoe, he said, “Do you happen to have a fresh cigarette about you—just one?”



# Jack London

## The Dead Horse Trail

*A tale of murder and manhunt in the Alaska of the 1890's, and of a man who "never had half a chance," who considered life a "skin game," and himself a "cold deck" . . . by an American writer whose glamor never seems to fade . . .*

FORTUNE LA PEARLE CRUSHED his way through the snow, sobbing, straining, cursing his luck, Alaska, Nome, the cards, and the man who had felt his knife. The hot blood was freezing on his hands, and the scene yet bright in his eyes—the man clutching the table and sinking slowly to the floor, the rolling counters and the scattered deck, the swift shiver throughout the room and the pause, the game keepers no longer calling and the clatter of the chips dying away, the startled faces, the infinite instant of silence, and then the great blood-roar and tide of vengeance which lapped his heels and turned the town mad behind him.

"All hell's broke loose," he sneered, turning aside in the darkness and heading for the beach. Lights were flashing from open doors as tent, cabin, and dancehall let slip their denizens on the chase. The howling of dogs quickened his feet.

He ran on and on. The sounds grew dim, and the pursuit dissipated itself in vain rage and aimless groping. But a flitting shadow clung to him. Head thrust over shoulder, he caught glimpses of it, now taking vague shape on an open expanse of snow, now merging into the deeper shadows of some darkened cabin or beach-listed craft.

Fortune La Pearle swore like a woman, weakly, with the hint of tears that comes of exhaustion, and plunged deeper into the maze of heaped ice, tents, and prospect holes. He stumbled over taut hawsers and piles of Dunnage, tripped on crazy guy-ropes and insanely planted pegs, and fell again and again on frozen dumps and mounds of hoarded drift-wood.

At times, when he deemed he had drawn clear, his head dizzy with the painful pounding of his heart and the suffocating intake of his breath, he slackened down;

and always the shadow leaped out of the gloom and forced him on in heartbreaking flight.

A swift intuition flashed on him, leaving in its trail the cold chill of superstition. The persistence of the shadow he invested with his gambler's symbolism. Silent, inexorable, not to be shaken off, he took it as the fate which waited at the last turn when chips were cashed in and gains and losses counted up.

Fortune La Pearle believed in those rare, illuminating moments, when the intelligence flung from it time and space, to rise naked through eternity and read the facts of life from the open book of chance. That this was such a moment he had no doubt; and when he turned inland and sped across the snow-covered tundra he was not startled because the shadow took on greater definiteness and drew in closer.

Oppressed with his own impotence, La Pearle halted in the midst of the white waste and whirled about. His right hand slipped from its mitten, and a revolver, at level, glistened in the pale light of the stars.

"Don't shoot. I haven't a gun," said the shadow.

Perhaps things fell out differently because Uri Bram had no gun that night when he sat on the hard benches of the El Dorado and saw murder done. To that fact also might be at-

tributed the trip on the Long Trail which he took subsequently with a most unlikely comrade. But be it as it may, he repeated, "Don't shoot. Can't you see I haven't a gun?"

"Then what the flaming hell did you take after me for?" demanded the gambler, lowering his revolver.

Uri Bram shrugged. "It don't matter much, anyhow. I want you to come with me."

"Where?"

"To my shack, over on the edge of the camp."

But Fortune La Pearle drove the heel of his moccasin into the snow and attested by his various deities to the madness of Uri Bram. "Who are you," he asked, "and what am I that I should put my neck into the rope at your bidding?"

"I am Uri Bram," the other said simply, "and my shack is over there on the edge of camp. I don't know who you are, but you've thrust the soul from a living man's body—there's the blood red on your sleeve—and like a second Cain, the hand of all mankind is against you and there is no place you may lay your head. Now, I have a shack—"

"For the love of your mother, hold your say, man," interrupted Fortune La Pearle; "or I'll make you a second Abel for the joy of it. So help me, I will! With a thousand men to lay me by

the heels, looking high and low, what do I want with your shack? I want to get out of here—away! Cursed swine! I've half a mind to go back and settle for a few of them, the pigs! One gorgeous, glorious fight and end the whole business! It's a skin game, that's what life is, and I'm sick of it!"

He stopped, crushed by his great desolation, and Uri Bram seized the moment. He was not given to speech, this man, and that which followed was the longest in his life, save one long afterward in another place.

"That's why I told you about my shack. I can stow you there so they'll never find you, and I've got grub in plenty. Elsewise you can't get away. No dogs, no nothing, the sea closed, St. Michael the nearest post, runners to carry the news before you, the same over the portage to Anvik—not a chance in the world for you! Now wait with me till it blows over. They'll forget all about you in a month or less, what of stampeding to York and whatnot, and you can hit the trail under their noses and they won't bother."

At the door of the shack the gambler hesitated for an instant, marveling at the strangeness of this man who had befriended him, and doubting. But by the candlelight he found the cabin comfortable and without occu-

pants, and he was quickly rolling a cigarette while the other man made coffee. His muscles relaxed in the warmth and he lay back intently studying Uri's face through the curling wisps of smoke.

It was a powerful face, but its strength was of that peculiar sort which stands girt in and unrelated. The seams were deep-graven, more like scars, while the stern features were in no way softened by hints of sympathy or humor. Everything was harsh, the nose, the lips, the voice, the lines about the mouth. It was the face of one who communed much with himself. He was narrow but deep; and Fortune, his own humanity broad and shallow, could make nothing of him.

"Lend a hand, Mister Man," Uri ordered when the cups had been emptied. "We've got to fix up for visitors."

The bunk was built against a side and end of the cabin. It was a rude affair, the bottom being composed of driftwood logs overlaid with moss. At the foot the rough ends of these timbers, projected in an uneven row. From the side next to the wall Uri ripped back the moss and removed three of the logs. The jagged ends he sawed off and replaced so that the projecting row remained unbroken.

Fortune carried in sacks of flour from the cache and piled

them on the floor beneath the aperture. On these Uri laid a pair of long sea bags, and over all spread several thicknesses of moss and blankets. On this Fortune could lie, with the sleeping furs stretching over him from one side of the bunk to the other, and all men could look on it and declare it empty.

In the weeks which followed several domiciliary visits were paid, not a shack or tent in Nome escaping, but Fortune lay in his cranny undisturbed. In fact, little attention was given to Uri Bram's cabin; for it was the last place under the sun to expect to find the murderer of John Randolph.

Except during such interruptions Fortune lolled about the cabin, playing long games of solitaire and smoking endless cigarettes. Though his volatile nature loved geniality and laughter, he quickly accommodated himself to Uri's taciturnity. Beyond the actions and plans of his pursuers, the state of the trails and the price of dogs, they never talked; and these things were only discussed at rare intervals and briefly.

But Fortune fell to working out a system, and hour after hour, day after day, he shuffled and dealt, shuffled and dealt, noted the combinations of the cards in long columns, and shuffled and dealt again. Toward the end even this absorption failed him, and

head bowed upon the table he visioned the lively all-night houses of Nome, where the gamekeepers and lookouts worked in shifts and the clattering roulette ball never slept.

At such times his loneliness and bankruptcy stunned him till he sat for hours in the same unblinking, unchanging position. At other times, his long-pent bitterness found voice in passionate outbursts; for he had rubbed the world the wrong way and did not like the feel of it.

"Life's a skin game," he was fond of repeating, and on this one note he rang the changes. "I never had half a chance," he complained. "I was faked in my birth and flimflammed with my mother's milk. She blamed me for being born, and looked on me as a cold deck. Why didn't she give me a show? Why didn't the world? Why did I go broke in Seattle? Why did I take the steerage, and live like a hog to Nome? Why did I go to the El Dorado? I was heading for Big Pete's and only went for matches. Why didn't I have matches? Why did I want to smoke? Don't you see? All worked out, every bit of it, all parts fitting snug. Before I was born, like as not. That's why! That's why John Randolph passed the word and his checks in at the same time. Damn him! It served him right! Why didn't he keep his tongue between his

teeth and give me a chance? He knew I was next to broke. Why didn't I hold my hand? Oh, why? Why?"

At such outbreaks Uri said no word, gave no sign, save that his gray eyes seemed to turn dull and muddy, as though from lack of interest. There was nothing in common between these two men, and this fact Fortune La Pearle grasped sufficiently to wonder sometimes why Uri had stood by him.

But the time of waiting came to an end. Even a community's lust for blood cannot stand before its lust for gold. The murder of John Randolph had already passed into the annals of the camp, and there it rested. There was gold in the creek beds and ruby beaches, and when the sea opened, the men with healthy sacks would sail away to where the good things of life were sold absurdly cheap.

So, one night, Fortune helped Uri Bram harness the dogs and lash the sled, and the two took the winter trail south on the ice. But it was not all south; for they left the sea east from St. Michael's, crossed the divide, and struck the Yukon at Anvik, many hundred miles from its mouth. Then on, into the northeast, past Koyukuk, Tanana, and Minook, till they rounded the Great Curve at Fork Yukon, crossed and re-crossed the Arctic Circle, and

headed south through the Flats. It was a weary journey; and Fortune would have wondered why the man went with him, had not Uri told him that he owned claims and had men working at Eagle.

On the morning after passing Eagle they rose early. This was their last camp, and they were now to part. Fortune's heart was light. There was a promise of spring in the land and the days were growing longer. The way was passing into Canadian territory. Liberty was at hand, the sun was returning, and each day saw him nearer to the Great Outside.

The world was big, and he could once again paint his future in royal red. He whistled about the breakfast and hummed snatches of song while Uri put the dogs in harness and packed up. But when all was ready, Fortune's feet itching to be off, Uri pulled an unused backlog to the fire and sat down.

"Ever hear of the Dead Horse Trail?"

He glanced up meditatively and Fortune shook his head, chafing at the delay.

"Sometimes there are meetings under circumstances which make men remember," Uri continued, speaking in a low voice and very slowly, "and I met a man under such circumstances on the Dead Horse Trail. Freighting an outfit over the White Pass in '97 broke

many a man's heart, for there was a world of reason when they gave that trail its name. The horses died like mosquitoes in the first frost, and from Skaguay to Bennett they rotted in heaps. Men shot them, worked them to death, and when they were gone, went back to the beach and bought more. Some did not bother to shoot them—stripping the saddles off and the shoes and leaving them where they fell. Their hearts turned to stone—those which did not break—and they became beasts, the men on Dead Horse Trail.

"It was there I met a man. When he rested at midday he took the packs from the horses so that they, too, might rest. He paid \$50 a hundred-weight for their fodder, and more. He used his own bed to blanket their backs when they rubbed raw. Other men let the saddles eat holes the size of water buckets. Other men, when the shoes gave out, let them wear their hoofs down to the bleeding stumps. This man spent his last dollar for horseshoe nails. I know this because we slept in one bed and ate from one pot and became blood-brothers where men lost their grip of things and died blaspheming God.

"He was never too tired to ease a strap or tighten a cinch, and often there were tears in his eyes when he looked on all that waste of misery. At a passage in the

rocks, where the brutes upreared and stretched their forelegs upward like cats to clear the wall, the way was piled with carcasses where they had toppled back. And here he stood, in the stench of hell, with a cheery word and a hand on the rump at the right time, till the string passed by. And when one bogged down, he blocked the trail till it was clear again; nor did the man live who crowded him at such time.

"At the end of the trail a man who had killed fifty horses wanted to buy, but we looked at him and at our own—mountain cayuses from eastern Oregon. Five thousand he offered, and we were broke; but we remembered the poison grass of the Summit and the passage in the Rocks, and the man who was my brother spoke no word, but he looked at me and we understood each other. So we took our rifles and shot them to the last one, while the man who had killed fifty horses cursed us till his throat cracked.

"That man, with whom I welded blood-brotherhood on the Dead Horse Trail—"

"Why, that man was John Randolph," Fortune exclaimed.

Uri nodded and said, "I am glad you understand."

"I am ready," Fortune answered, the old weary bitterness strong in his face. "Go ahead, but hurry."

Uri Bram rose to his feet.

"I have had faith in God all the days of my life. I believe He loves justice. I believe He is looking down upon us now, choosing between us. I believe He waits to work His will through my own right arm. And such is my belief that we will take equal chance and let Him speak His own judgment."

Fortune's heart leaped at the words. He did not know much concerning Uri's God, but he believed in Chance, and Chance had been coming his way ever since the night he ran down the beach and across the snow. "But there is only one gun," he objected.

"We will fire turn about," Uri replied, at the same time throwing out the cylinder of the other man's Colt and examining it. "And the cards to decide who fires first! One hand of Seven Up!"

Fortune's blood was warming to the game, and he drew the deck from his pocket. Surely Chance would not desert him now! He thought of the returning sun as he cut for deal and he thrilled when he found the deal was his. He shuffled and dealt, and Uri cut him the Jack of Spades. They laid down their hands. Uri's was bare of trumps, while he held ace, deuce. The outside seemed very near to him as they stepped off the fifty paces.

"If God withholds His hand

and you drop me, the dogs and outfit are yours. You'll find a bill of sale, already made out, in my pocket," Uri explained, facing the path of the bullet; straight and broad-breasted.

Fortune shook a vision of the sun shining on the ocean from his eyes and took aim. He was very careful. Twice he lowered as the spring breeze shook the pines. But the third time he dropped on one knee, gripped the revolver steadily in both hands, and fired.

Uri whirled half about, threw up his arms, swayed wildly for a moment, and sank into the snow. But Fortune knew he had fired dead center; else the man would not have whirled.

When Uri, mastering the flesh and struggling to his feet, beckoned for the weapon, Fortune was minded to shoot again. But he thrust the idea from him. Chance had been very good to him already, he felt, and if he tricked now he would have to pay for it afterward. No, he would play fair. Besides, Uri was hard hit and could not possibly hold the heavy Colt long enough to draw a bead.

"And where is your God now?" he taunted, as he gave the wounded man the revolver.

And Uri answered, "God has not yet spoken. Prepare that He may speak."

Fortune faced him, but twisted

his chest sideways in order to present less surface. Uri tottered about drunkenly. The revolver was very heavy and he doubted, like Fortune, because of its weight. But he held it, arm extended, above his head, and then let it slowly drop forward and down. At the instant Fortune's

left breast and the sight flashed into line with his eye, Uri pulled the trigger.

Fortune did not whirl, but gay San Francisco dimmed and faded, and as the sun-bright snow turned black and blacker, he breathed his last malediction on the Chance he had misplayed.



# George Harmon Coxe

## Seed of Suspicion

This story begins with an apparent mugging of Kent Murdock, press photographer and amateur detective, and from that explosive opening it is action, action all the way . . . Meet a portrait painter who is a whizbang with the ladies; his unhappy wife who is obviously hiding a secret; a nightclub owner who used to be in the rackets; his unhappy sister who is also hiding a secret; and assorted suspects, to say nothing of assorted detectives, private and professional—all in a taut, fast-moving short novel expertly told by one of the real “old pros” of the “grandest game in the world” . . .

### Detective: KENT MURDOCK

KENT MURDOCK HAD NO IDEA he was being followed. Even later, when he had a chance to think things over, he had no way of knowing whether the man picked him up as he left the office, or stepped out of the shadows as Murdock passed on his way to his Marlborough Street apartment.

It was not late—it had been just ten o’clock when he left the photographic studio at the *Times-Clarion*—and he had been too preoccupied with his thoughts to take notice of those who passed him on the street. To him it was just another night, colder than most, with a damp rawness in the air that promised snow before

long, and he walked briskly but unhurriedly, a rangy, moderately tall man, with good shoulders and an erect but easy way of holding himself.

He was between Newbury and Commonwealth when it happened.

There was no warning but a sudden rush of footsteps behind him, and in the instant that he became aware of them, and tried to turn, he saw only darkness in the deserted street and the high brick wall enclosing someone’s town house and yard.

Then the arm clamped tight about his neck, yanking him off balance.

A mighty fist clubbed him behind the ear. The arm around

his neck was still tight, and he could tell from the size of it and the breadth of chest behind him that the man was big and powerful.

Murdock went limp, purposely, turning a little more as the arm sought a new grip, then hooked viciously with his elbow.

The man grunted and hit him again. The sidewalk tilted, and after that things were a little vague for Murdock. He remembered the series of "muggings" that had occurred during the past week. He heard a hoarse whisper that said, "How do you like it, chump?" and then he was down, a kick in the ribs knocking his breath out before he could roll clear.

"Get up and we'll do it again," the voice said, and hands reached for him. Then Murdock was up, swinging blindly, furiously, but without much strength.

Not that he was any weakling. As the Number One photographer for the *Times-Clarion*, and later as picture chief, he had learned how to handle himself, and he seldom worried about the odds; in this case, however, he'd had no chance to defend himself. Now, already groggy, he went down again under a new blow, but this time the expected kick did not materialize. Somehow, there was light in the street and the man was running.

Murdock got his head up. He heard a car in back of him. A

second car swung in from Commonwealth, its headlights sweeping wide, and it was this new brilliance that enabled him to get a fleeting glimpse of his assailant.

He was at the corner now, running hard, yet turning for a last look. Murdock saw only the profile and the size of him, and his head was clear enough now to photograph mentally the underslung jaw and the sharp depression where the bridge of his nose should have been.

Then the fellow was gone, and the cars had stopped and a taxi driver and his fare were running across the street.

They asked him what had happened and was he all right, and then someone spoke his name and he turned, recognizing the tall, spare man who had come from the coupé behind him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Thatcher," he said. "You were just in time."

"A little late, I'm afraid," Thatcher said.

"Yeah," said the taxi driver and spoke profanely of muggers in general and this one in particular. "A minute earlier and we might have nailed the guy. Sure you're all right, Mac? We could drop you at a doctor's."

"I'll take him, driver," Thatcher said. "He's a friend of mine." He had Murdock by the arm now, turning him toward the coupé, asking him whether he wanted to see a doctor first or

go direct to police headquarters.

Bennett Thatcher was one of the city's finest criminal lawyers. As such, Murdock had photographed him often, and because he still felt a little rocky, he was grateful now for the older man's help.

"I don't need a doctor," he said. "I'd rather raise a row at headquarters."

Bennett Thatcher drove around the block and back along Berkeley Street. "You seem to be getting more than your share of trouble," he said. "I read that paragraph in the *Bulletin* about the business with Lloyd Farnsworth at the Club Flamingo. Last night you had to baffle him, and now tonight a thug jumps you."

"It wasn't much of a battle. With Farnsworth, I mean." Murdock had been kidded about the incident several times during the day. "Farnsworth was a little drunk," he said. "He resented my being with his wife."

"A two-punch affair, the *Bulletin* said. Farnsworth missed, and you didn't." Thatcher stopped for a traffic light. "Did this fellow tonight rob you?"

Murdock said no, and now he was thinking of the sequence of action and what the thug had said, and it was then, though he did not realize it at the time, that the first seed of suspicion took root in his consciousness and began slowly to sprout...

Lieutenant Bacon had set his feet on his desk and a long black stogie in his mouth when Murdock stepped into the little office on the fourth floor of police headquarters, after having tried in vain to locate a certain captain to whom his complaint should have properly been made.

Bacon, a graying, stiff-backed veteran, glanced up casually, and quickly narrowed his gaze. He swung his feet down and removed the stogie. "Now what?" he said to Murdock.

Murdock sat down and spoke morosely, "I came in to check on a rumor that's going around that you fellows are collecting the tax-payers' money to protect the public from muggers."

"Not me," said Bacon. "I'm strictly homicide." Then, seeing the slight bruise on the photographer's cheekbone and the resentment in his eyes, he asked, "Who got mugged?"

"Me," said Murdock and told him where and when.

"What did you lose?"

"Nothing."

"Those cars scared him off in time, huh?" Murdock thought it over, and now the suspicion in his mind began to blossom. He heard again the hoarse whisper, "How do you like it, chump? . . . Get up and we'll do it again," and he knew now that these were funny words for a mugger to say.

Furthermore, a man intent on robbery could have knocked him out easily from behind, taken his wallet, and been away in half the time the thug had used. "What?" he said, aware that Bacon had spoken.

"I said if you got any kind of look at him we could go into the Bureau of Records and you could look at pictures."

"Some other time." Murdock stood up, "I've changed my mind. I don't think I was mugged."

"Huh?"

"I think that guy was hired to work me over."

"Yeah? Who by?"

"Lloyd Farnsworth."

Bacon straightened in his chair, his gaze troubled. "Wait a minute. You mean on account of that business at the Flamingo last night? I heard about it but—"

Murdock was no longer listening. For his doubt had become a half certainty. He was sitting again with Rhoda Farnsworth at the Flamingo, seeing Lloyd lurch toward their table, while a pretty, dark-haired girl tried to hold him back. Big, blond, handsome in a soft, decadent way, Lloyd Farnsworth spoke insultingly, and as Murdock rose, he swung hard, missed, and tried to slap his wife. Then Murdock hit him.

Now, remembering it all, recalling the threats and imprecations Farnsworth had mouthed as the waiters hurried him from the

room, he found his hunch a sound one. Anger expanded inside him.

Lieutenant Bacon stood up, studying the photographer's stormy dark eyes and the hard, clean line of his jaw, and not liking what he saw. He had known Murdock a long time, had worked with him often and respected him greatly, not only for his honesty and ability as a press-photographer, but for his intelligence and sense of humor.

Murdock was intimidated by no one; he could speak the language of cops and bookies and circulation hustlers, and still be understood by dowagers in drawing rooms. Yet he seldom looked for trouble, and that's what bothered Bacon now. He had never seen Murdock in such a state of suppressed fury and he said so.

"Don't blow your top," he said. "So maybe Farnsworth did hire the guy. Go looking for him now, feeling like you do, and you'll get yourself in a jam."

"If I do I can handle it."

"Maybe—if you wait until tomorrow. Then, if you still feel like it, go ahead and poke him in the nose. Being strictly a rat, he'll probably charge you with assault, and the judge'll slap a fine on you and you'll wish you'd let it ride. But if that's the way you want it—" The Lieutenant put a hand on Murdock's arm. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

"I can walk."

Bacon hesitated, his eyes wise. "Okay. Walk. Maybe that'll cool you off. Maybe, between here and your place, you'll start to think again. If you do, remember what I said. Don't go looking for Lloyd Farnsworth tonight."

Kent Murdock remembered the words as he walked cross-town, striding hard, eyes up but unaware of his surroundings. By the time he had crossed Boylston he had begun to think again, and when he turned into the entrance of the small apartment house his boiling rage had been reduced to the simmering stage and common sense was exerting its steady hand.

It was still impossible to think of Lloyd Farnsworth without rancor, and his bitterness had deeper roots than the affair at the Flamingo and the beating he had received tonight. It was a resentment of long standing; based on the suffering and humiliation Farnsworth had inflicted on his wife; and only now could Murdock appreciate the soundness of Bacon's advice that his desire to strike back be postponed until another time.

He was crossing the little foyer with this in mind when the woman rose from the settee by the elevator and came to meet him, tall and blonde and bareheaded, her mink coat covering a simple woolen dress.

"I phoned your office," Rhoda

Farnsworth said. "They told me you'd left, so I thought I'd wait."

He took her hands in his, surprised that she should come here like this. He regarded her anxiously. "Has he been bothering you again?"

"No, Kent. I haven't seen him since last night."

"Something is. Bothering you, I mean. Come on."

Upstairs he made no further reference to the reason for her visit, but offered a drink, and when she refused, made one for himself. He excused himself and washed up, seeing now that there was no mark on his face except the small, faint bruise on one cheek.

When he had finished he sat down opposite her and said, "Now."

"It isn't anything," she said. "I'm going away for a while. I wanted to say goodbye."

She rose, leaving her coat on the sofa, and paced across the room, a gracefully slender woman, with gray eyes, a wide, mobile mouth, and honey-colored hair drawn tight back at the sides and worn in a low bun. When she stopped to stare out the window, his mind went back and he remembered how it had been in the beginning. She had been nineteen at the time, a gay, vital girl, spoiled, but good inside and genuine.

They had talked of love and

marriage then, and it had been Murdock who hesitated. For she had money of her own, and he had been a sixty-a-week press photographer; he had been afraid of what might happen. But they were young and there were no lasting scars, and even with the beaux that followed they had remained friends.

She had been away when he was discharged from the Army. She had come back six months ago and called him, and because the thing that had once been between them had been fine and honest, the basis of their companionship was sound. They had lunch now and then, or cocktails, or occasionally a dinner. And they talked. That was all. Neither, it seemed, wanted nor expected more.

It had been that way when Lloyd Farnsworth came back from Mexico City, three months later. He had his apartment, and Rhoda had hers, but they remained legally married, and it was his nature to see that she did not forget this. Murdock had seen the bruises on her wrists and arms, and knew there must be other bruises that did not show.

When he asked why she did not get a divorce, she gave him an answer he had to accept, though he felt sure there must be another reason...

"You don't have to leave," Murdock said.

"You don't know him. After last night he won't rest until he gets even."

"I'll take care of that." Murdock went on to tell what had happened during the past hour, seeing her gray eyes widen with disbelief and then with fear.

"Yes," she breathed. "It would be like Lloyd to do a thing like that."

"Physical punishment is a thing he understands." Murdock hesitated, his anger starting to build again. "He's been handing it out quite a while. A dose of the same medicine properly applied might cure him," he said.

The telephone rang, and he picked it up. "Yes," he said, and then stiffened as the familiar voice came to him.

"Hear you had a little trouble tonight," Lloyd Farnsworth said.

Murdock had difficulty talking. The taunting phrase smashed his defenses, and all the bitterness and resentment came surging back. He started to speak, and found he had to swallow first. He said, "Where are you?"

Farnsworth's reply was measured and distinct. "If you want to settle things, come on up."

"I'll be there," Murdock said.

Kent hung up, shaking a little with this new anger he no longer tried to control, the things in his mind written clearly in his hot, dark eyes and the tight lines of his face.

Rhoda Farnsworth saw it all and guessed the answer. She gave a little cry when he confirmed her fears; she pleaded with him, her voice distressed: "No, Kent! Please! I've caused you enough trouble."

Murdock got his coat and hat, and she kept pace with him. "You don't know him," she said. "You don't know how strong he is. Last night he was drunk."

"You mean he's bigger than I am." Murdock held her coat, his smile grim. "Come on, baby. And stop worrying. This is no trouble; this will be a pleasure."

He got her out of the apartment, closing his mind to the things she said, and on the sidewalk she knew further talk was useless and was quiet as he handed her into her car.

He waited until she drove off, and then walked quickly to Beacon Street, looking for a taxi. There was some traffic here, a few cabs, but none that were empty. He kept walking, his rage riding him.

He forgot about the taxi until he started to cross Massachusetts Avenue, and then, aware that he had but three blocks farther to go, decided to do without one. As a result, it took him a good twenty-five minutes to reach the block-long street where Lloyd Farnsworth lived on the top floor of a remodeled three-story brick house.

It was quiet here at the moment, and dark. The little park across the way was deserted. There were a few cars parked in front of the apartments on the east side of the street, but on the park side there was only one, a heavy coupé with a three-digit license number which Murdock noted absently and from long habit, since low numbers often signified owners of some importance.

He noticed, too, that the coupé was empty, and then he turned into Farnsworth's house. He found the lower door unlocked, and climbed swiftly to the top floor.

He knocked loudly on the heavy wooden door. When a muffled voice called from within, he opened the door. He stepped into the entrance hall and saw the lighted room beyond. He took one step, and then, without warning, the lights went out.

Before he could turn, before he could close the door or duck away from the certain peril he now knew was close, something slammed down on his head, and he felt himself falling as the pain exploded inside him . . .

When Kent Murdock opened his eyes he was flat on his back and the room lights were on. It did not mean anything to him, then; nothing meant anything but the ache in his head and the

nausea at the pit of his stomach.

He tried to look about, but his neck hurt when he twisted it; so he rolled slowly over and got his knees under him, pushing and turning until he could sit up. His hat was off and he explored his head, finding that the source of pain was a lump over one ear. His face hurt, too, and he wondered about that.

He wanted to lie down again, but he didn't. He moved his hand to brace himself, and it touched metal. When he glanced down he found the object, a heavy brass candlestick he had never seen before. As he stared at it, seeing now the dark stain on the top edge, he remembered how the lights had gone out as he stood in the hall.

But the lights were on again and he was no longer in the hall. He was in an enormous living room, with portraits on the walls and two life-size nudes, one a dark-haired woman sitting at a dressing table, and the other a full-length profile of a girl with a mirror in her hand.

Then, as he began to think again, he glanced back at the brass candlestick, a growing sense of horror pressing in on him.

He got quickly to his feet. That was when he saw Lloyd Farnsworth.

In life a big, well-built man with wavy blond hair and a smooth, tanned skin, he now lay

in front of a kneehole desk, face down, one arm crumpled under him. Even from where he stood, Murdock could see the matted darkness of the blond hair, the dark red spots on the rug. And it was then that the answer came to him.

For Murdock had seen and photographed too many dead men to be in any doubt about Farnsworth. In that same instant that he caught his breath and fought against the shock of his discovery, he understood the meaning of the red-tarnished candlestick, and knew with intuitive certainty that his own fingerprints would be on it.

Other things came to him with discouraging finality. He touched his face and found new marks there to explain the soreness he had felt. He looked at his right hand and saw the skinned knuckles. Then he moved quickly to Farnsworth and, kneeling down, found other marks on the man's cheekbone.

The scene was so circumstantially perfect that there was one terrifying moment when he wondered if perhaps he had not done this thing and forgotten it, like fighters he had heard of who, out on their feet, kept punching on instinct alone until consciousness finally returned.

He shook off the thought with an effort and walked quickly through the apartment. In the

bathroom he examined his face and saw the cut chin and the new lump on his jaw. He went into the bedroom, not looking for anything, but moving dazedly as he waited for the shock to pass.

A leather-framed portrait of a smiling, dark-haired girl stood on the bureau. Across it was scrawled *All my love, Nancy*, and he knew this was the girl who had been with Farnsworth the night before.

He went back into the living room, trying to think reasonably, wondering what he should do. When he found himself staring again at the candlestick he bent down and polished it clean with his handkerchief, all but the darkened edge.

Yet, even as he put it back, he knew this was not enough. If the killer was as smart as he seemed, there would be other prints on other objects in the room—prints that would match exactly Murdock's own. And now, standing there with his thoughts bogged down in hopelessness and dismay, he remembered his talk with Lieutenant Bacon.

Bacon would recall each detail, once the murderer was discovered, and he would amplify and embellish these details with supposition and suspicion. Bacon was his friend, yet Bacon would have no choice but to arrest him, under the circumstances. Therefore, the thing to do was to get out while he could, give himself a chance

to think, and make his plans.

This much was clear, and still he did not go. Perhaps it was because he was tired, beaten, and discouraged. Whatever the reason, he dropped down on the desk chair. That was how he happened to see the torn pieces of paper on the floor.

He went to one knee, knowing what they were now, not picking them up but nudging the bits in place, like a puzzle, until he had pieced together two Pullman tickets to Miami, Florida, and a reservation for a stateroom. After staring at them a moment, he scrambled the pieces with his hand and dropped back on the chair. Then, for want of something better to do, he began absently to open the desk drawers.

He saw at once that those at the sides were in order, and he did not disturb the contents. He might have gone away then had he not found the center drawer locked. It challenged him, and hardly aware of what he did, he went to Farnsworth, slid one hand into a trouser pocket until he found a ring of keys.

He straightened, and began moving to the desk as he examined them; then, unaccountably, he stopped. He found himself listening. In spite of himself, he turned and looked about the room, as though half expecting to find someone lurking in the shadowed

corners. The next moment he heard the sound that warned him of danger: the strident whine of tires as a speeding automobile rounded a nearby corner. With it came the throb of the motor, rising briefly, then falling away as the power was cut and the car drew closer.

He was at the window overlooking the street when the small sedan swerved in front of the building and rocked to a stop. He saw the three men jump out below him, one of them in uniform. When they crossed the sidewalk, Murdock wheeled from the window and ran down the hall toward the kitchen.

At the far side of this was a door. He tried it, handkerchief in hand, found it unlocked, opened it, and went out fast, feeling his way down the black stair well. A minute later he was in a narrow alley, its open end silhouetted against the night sky.

Groping his way along, he reached the corner without difficulty. He crossed to the little park, moved thirty feet inside its line of trees, and keeping in the deep shadows, he started back. The police car, he saw, was empty. He glanced up and could see no movement behind the Venetian blinds of Farnsworth's front room.

Then, about to back away, he noticed that the heavy coupé with its low license number was no

longer there; instead, a dark sedan was parked diagonally across from the house, and the man behind the wheel seemed intent on it and the police car.

Murdock picked out a tree near the curbing, and stood behind it. The man in the sedan seemed vaguely familiar. As Murdock watched, the dashlight flicked on and the motor started.

Murdock recognized the driver, then. Dr. John Carlton. What made it important was that Carlton, like Murdock, had once been in love with Rhoda Farnsworth.

Jack Fenner had an apartment off Hemenway Street, within easy walking distance of Lloyd Farnsworth's place. Murdock thought of it almost at once, not only because it was close, but because Fenner, besides being a friend of long standing, was probably the best private detective in the city.

Luckily, Fenner was in. He was a medium-sized man with a look of sinewy toughness about him and a sharply chiseled face. His quick agate eyes took one look at Murdock's face and expression, and he suppressed the wisecrack he would have normally made.

"You know where the bathroom is," he said. "Clean up. I'll make a drink." He locked the door and went off to the kitchen. When he had the drinks he came into the bathroom and

I nodded his approval. "You look better already," he said. "Here."

Murdock took the drink, swallowed gratefully while Fenner administered to the cut chin and skinned knuckles. When he had finished, they went into the living room and Fenner made another drink for his guest. Murdock told his story from the beginning, while Fenner slumped in his chair and listened.

"You were smart to come here," he said when Murdock finished.

"I wanted to talk to you before I went home."

"You're not going home," Fenner said. "After what you told Bacon, he's probably got a man there waiting for you now. He's got to arrest you. If I was a dick I'd have to arrest you. And murder is not a bailable offense in this city."

Murdock sighed. He said, "They'll get me, anyway. And when they do, if they find out you put me up, they'll make you an accessory."

"Probably."

"You'll lose your license. And then what'll you do?"

Fenner opened his eyes and grinned: "If we try hard and get to be model prisoners," he said dryly, "they might let us play gin rummy a couple of nights a week." He stood up, his manner abrupt. "Come on, snap out of it! You've cracked jobs like this

before. Let's see what we've got."

Fenner started pacing, and Murdock watched him. It made him feel good, knowing how Fenner felt, hearing him talk.

"Farnsworth hired a thug to beat you up," the detective said. "He did it in such a way that you'd probably tumble to what was behind it. You did tumble. You told Bacon. Then Farnsworth got scared you weren't coming up so he could beat the tar out of you, so he phoned and dared you to come. The trouble was, somebody must have been with him when he made that call, and your luck was bad. Probably this guy had been wanting to kill Farnsworth for a long time, and all of a sudden he knows this is the perfect setup. He beats Farnsworth's skull in, lays for you, marks you up, and frames it neat; then he goes out and tips off the cops."

He paused, brow wrinkled. "Either that, or the guy comes in just after Farnsworth made the call and Farnsworth tells him what's cooking—and the guy jumps him. How long did it take you to get there? . . . Twenty-five minutes would have given the killer plenty of time. Now, who'd want to kill him?"

Fenner glanced up, as though just realizing what he'd said. He shrugged and grunted disparagingly.

"That's a silly question," he

said. "There must be a dozen guys who would've liked to kill him. Dames, too. He painted enough of them—with and without their clothes. There was something wrong with him, something morbid. He was nuts."

"He was a pretty fair painter."

"Yeah. I understand he could get fifteen hundred a throw."

"He got the women, too," Murdock said, his thoughts sliding off on a tangent.

"Sure. He was big and blond and handsome, and he had the kind of smile that promised women whatever they wanted. I don't know how else you can explain it. They knew the reputation he had, but they kept coming, letting him do portraits of them, figuring this time it would be different."

He glanced up, one lid half shut. "His wife is an old friend of yours, huh? He didn't care anything about her, did he? Then why didn't she divorce him?"

"She had a lot of pride," Murdock said. "She was young, then, and spoiled by too much money and not enough responsibility. Everyone advised her against the marriage, but she went ahead, and afterward, when it blew up, she didn't want to admit it."

"To stick it out as long as she did there must've been another reason."

"I think you're right," Murdock said. "But she says no."

Fenner yawned and got up.

"Let's go to bed. Let's sleep on it, and tomorrow I'll nose around and see what the score is."

In the morning Jack Fenner went out for newspapers while Murdock put breakfast on the table. When the detective returned, he pointed to a half-column story in the *Times-Clarion*.

Murdock scanned it but found no mention of his name. Police, summoned by an anonymous tip, said the paper, had gone to Lloyd Farnsworth's apartment shortly before midnight and found him dead of a fractured skull . . . . Several clues had been uncovered . . . . Pending an arrest, the veil of official silence had been drawn about the case. That was all.

"I'll be in the bulldog edition of the afternoon sheets," Murdock said morosely. "I wonder what they'll use for a picture, if any."

"Cut it out!" Fenner said. "Eat!"

Murdock obeyed and found he was hungry. He felt better when he had finished, and went directly to the telephone. He dialed the *Times-Clarion* and asked for T. A. Wyman, the Managing Editor.

Wyman's reaction to the call was characteristic. "Are you all right?" he asked first. Then, having satisfied himself on this point, he said, "Are you crazy?"

He wanted to know where Murdock was, and what he thought he was doing by hiding

out, and why he didn't come down and thrash things out properly.

Murdock said he had an idea the police were looking for him; that was why he couldn't come in yet. He said he had some things to do first, and once the police caught him they'd probably hold him without bail.

"Not for long, they won't," Wyman said. "You want to bet? . . . I talked to Bennett Thatcher," he said. "He's agreed to handle the case."

Murdock took a breath and felt immeasurably better. Not just because Wyman had hired the best lawyer in town for him, but because Wyman assumed his innocence, unquestioningly.

"All right," he said. "I'll see him. But not downtown. I don't want to get picked up."

"I'll call him," Wyman said. "I'll tell Thatcher to wait for you at his home, and that you'll be there in an hour. Okay?"

Jack Fenner nodded approval when Murdock relayed the information. "If you've got Thatcher you're halfway off the hook already." He rummaged in the closet and brought out a trench coat and a gray felt hat. "You wore a brown hat and top-coat. Today you wear a gray hat and a trench coat—and these."

He produced a pair of tinted, shell-rimmed glasses, not dark enough to be conspicuous, but with off-white lenses.

"Don't flag any taxis," he added. "You know too many drivers. Get your cabs at the stands after you've looked over the hackies. Come back here and wait for me after you've finished with Thatcher."

"And what'll you be doing?"

"The best I can."

Murdock watched Fenner move toward the door, and then stopped him. He remembered John Carlton and his sedan the night before and his interest in Farnsworth's place. He remembered the heavy coupé that had been parked outside when he went in, and had been gone when he came out. He gave the detective the three-digit number, and asked him to check it, and told him why.

Fenner was interested. "Will do," he said. "That's a good place to start."

Bennett Thatcher lived with two servants in a brick-and-frame Tudor house in the suburbs, and when Murdock rang, Thatcher himself opened the door and led the way across the paneled hall and into the high-ceilinged drawing room. Here Murdock stopped to gaze at the portrait over the mantel, which showed a slim, golden-haired woman in a simple evening gown, a woman of perhaps twenty-eight, delicately made, with a gentle mouth and smiling eyes.

He remembered her now, and

the wedding, some six years back, of the successful middle-aged lawyer and this girl not long out of college. Murdock had been in the Army at the time of her death, but he had since heard that it had happened as the result of an accidental overdose of sleeping tablets, and he knew that because of this, Thatcher had taken the lead in advocating state legislation to restrict the sale of barbiturates. Yet it was not these things that held Murdock now, but rather the beauty of the portrait.

Thatcher, following his glance, looked at the picture, too. Thatcher was a neat, well-groomed man with a lean, fit look about him not often seen in men of fifty. A shrewd, implacable adversary in a courtroom, he had a crisp, direct way of talking that fitted perfectly his naturally stern countenance and steady, penetrating gaze. Yet now, looking up at the portrait, there was little of the lawyer about him and no sternness at all in his eyes.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" he said. He hesitated, continued presently, his tone quiet. "She gave it to me for my birthday two years ago, as a surprise. I lost her only two months later, and but for this I would have nothing left but memories... She was the only woman I ever loved," he added simply, and then, as though reluctant to display his emotions further, he motioned

toward the adjoining study.

"Let's go in here," he said, "and talk about you... Did you kill him?" he asked when they were seated.

Murdock's eyes darkened and his voice was as blunt as Thatcher's. "What do you think?"

The lawyer shrugged. "It's a question I always ask. It doesn't make much difference, but I like to know. Suppose you start from the time you entered police headquarters last night. And I want all the details, understand?"

Murdock told the same story he had related to Jack Fenner, and Thatcher, sitting in his desk chair and staring out the window, came up with much the same reaction.

"It seems obvious enough," he said. "Whoever knew of Farnsworth's phone call to you killed him, then bruised his face and yours to make this hypothetical fight look authentic." He stuck his bony jaw out, massaged it briefly.

"That makes it bad," he said. "You've got a lot of friends around town; the police know you. If Farnsworth was shot to death it would look better, because the police know you're not the sort to go out with a gun to settle a personal grudge. But from things I've heard about you, you might use your fists. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what you started out to do... Maybe

that's a break for us," he said presently. "Looking at it in the right way, it might work to your advantage."

Murdock grunted softly. "I'm glad something works to my advantage."

"What I mean is, with the physical facts as they are, you could never be convicted of first-degree murder. You went there without a weapon and premeditation could not be proved."

Murdock had a sarcastic answer for that, too, but he kept it to himself.

"I think we could make a deal right now for a manslaughter charge," the lawyer said. "In court I might even get an acquittal on self-defense."

"It's not enough," Murdock cut in. "I'm not interested in an acquittal. If I stand trial, acquitted or not, a lot of people are going to remember. Always I'll be the guy who murdered Lloyd Farnsworth, and I say that's no good. I didn't kill him, and I don't want to stand trial on any charge."

Thatcher's brows came up. "What do you suggest?"

"Ha!" Murdock's laugh was abrupt and unpleasant. "I suggest I go out and find out who did kill him."

Thatcher smiled briefly to show he appreciated the sardonic humor of the remark. "That would be the ideal solution, of course;

but—" He paused, his fingers drumming the desk top. "What you want is time—right?"

"I want to stay out of jail. I'll surrender on any charge, provided I can get bail."

"All right." Thatcher sat up, his tone brisk. "That makes sense. The police don't know yet that I'm acting for you. I understand they have certain evidence that points conclusively to your guilt, according to them. I'll find out about it. I'll see the District Attorney and throw my weight around. With your record and the *Times-Clarion* behind you I think we'll make out all right."

He stood up and shook hands. "Call me tonight. And don't worry about it. Also"—he hesitated, smiled again—"try not to get yourself caught until I know where we stand."

When Jack Fenner came back to the apartment shortly after six that evening he brought a newspaper that said the police were looking for Kent Murdock; also some news of his own.

"That coupé you saw last night with the three-figure number belongs to Rudy Yates," he said.

"The gangster?"

"Ex-gangster," Fenner said. "And what do you think? Rudy came to see me this afternoon." He took out a hundred-dollar bill and spread it on the kitchen table. "Retainer."

Murdock peered at him, dark eyes puzzled. "Why?" he asked. "Why should Rudy come to you?"

"On account of my reputation and great ability. Also," Fenner said, "I think he was playing the odds. He knows you're in hiding, and he knows I'm a friend of yours. He wants to see you."

"About what?"

"He didn't say." Fenner folded the bill and pocketed it lovingly. "I sort of made a tentative date for you. At the Club 66."

Murdock greeted the remark with a grunt of derision. "Oh, fine," he said, recalling the club's central location, popularity, and reputation for decorous dancing and good food. "I just walk in and ask for Rudy and wait for the police."

"No," said Fenner. "You go down the alley beside it, coming in from the street behind, and you sneak up to a certain door that I will tell you about, and walk in."

"It'll be all unlocked for me, of course."

"Of course. Because I'll go in first and unlock it." Fenner grinned. "Then you cross the hall to the first door on the left and open it, and that is Rudy's office. He don't know when you're coming, or if you're coming at all, so it ought to be a surprise."

Murdock thought it over and liked the idea.

"Yes," he said. "I can ask

Rudy about his coupé. He might even know something about those torn Pullman tickets I found."

Judging by the procession of taxis that stopped to discharge passengers, business at Club 66 was good at 9:40 that night. Out front, the street lamps and a fancy marquee made the entrance a well-lighted and inviting spot; but forty feet back from the sidewalk the alley was dark and windy, and Murdock had to grope his way to find the proper door.

It was unlocked, as Jack Fenner had promised, and with a quick backward glance to make sure he was alone, Murdock stepped into a narrow, dimly lighted hall and crossed diagonally to another door marked PRIVATE. He moved in without knocking.

It was a squarish room with another door on the left, no windows, modern furniture, and indirect lighting. Opposite the hall door was a white, flat-topped desk and behind it sat a black-eyed man of forty or so, with a pink, freshly massaged face that looked more muscular than soft, and sleek black hair. In that first instant as he glanced up, the mouth was hard, the eyes annoyed; then, as he leaned back, the lips relaxed.

"Hello," Rudy Yates said. "I've been looking for you, Murdock. Sit down."

Murdock turned down his coat

collar and leaned back against the door, surveying Yates's stocky, dinner-jacketed figure, the carnation in his buttonhole. He took his time saying hello, and remembered many things.

Rudy Yates had started young, and until recently his business had been rackets, any kind of racket promising generous profits. He had done exceedingly well. He had sufficient resources to enter heavily into early-war black-market activities in tires and nylons and second-hand cars, and though he had been indicted for his activities in such used cars, the case had not come to trial.

More lately he had worn a more legitimate mantle. His Club 66 was a model of propriety, catering neither to gangsters, hepcats, nor swing music. He had extensive real-estate holdings, with offices downtown. He dressed expensively and spoke with suave politeness.

Murdock thought of all these things as he stood there, but his eyes were no longer on Rudy Yates; they were fastened on the photograph of a dark-haired, vivacious-looking girl which stood on the bookcase. It was the same girl who had signed her name Nancy on the photograph he had seen last night in Farnsworth's bedroom.

"I heard you did a job on Lloyd Farnsworth last night," Yates said.

"You ought to know," Murdock said. "You were there." He watched something flicker in Yates's narrowed eyes. "What did you want to see me about?"

Rudy Yates selected a cigar from a silver humidor, offered it to Murdock, then closed the lid when his offer was refused. He carefully removed one end with a gold cutter, then gestured toward the photograph before inserting the cigar in his mouth.

"I've got a kid sister," he said. "She doesn't like me much right now. She's been chasing around with Farnsworth."

"She was with him the other night at the Flamingo."

"She moved out of my place a month ago," Yates shrugged. "She's twenty-one, and I couldn't stop her. She has a little flat, and a job as a model. She has a swell boy from a nice family—name of Wordell—in love with her, but she won't give him a tumble since she's been going with Farnsworth."

He removed the cigar, examined it. "She thinks I killed him last night. She's making trouble for me."

"Why?"

"I suppose it's because I told her I would have Farnsworth's pretty face spoiled if she kept on seeing him."

"So?"

"So I have to convince her I didn't do it."

Murdock reached for a cigarette, his smile humorless. "That'll be a little tough to do, won't it? You were there last night and"—he hesitated, remembering the torn Pullman tickets, and decided to take a shot in the dark—"you knew she was about ready to run off to Florida with Farnsworth."

Murdock did not get the reaction he expected; he got no reaction at all. Nothing changed in the broad, pink face. Yates dropped his hand behind the desk, and Murdock thought it might come up with a gun. Instead of that, Yates produced a lighter and spoke between puffs.

"She thinks I did it," he said, as though there had been no interruption, "and I think you did. So do the police, and that I like." He turned as the door in the side wall opened, and said, "Come in, boys."

The two men who entered, apparently in response to a buzzer Yates had pressed when he reached for the lighter, took two forward steps and stopped. One was about Murdock's height and weight, but younger, with curly brown hair and a pug nose; the other was older, heavier, and partly bald. Both watched the press' photographer coldly and without interest.

"The more the police figure you," Yates continued calmly, "the more it takes the pressure

off me. With my sister. And the longer you stay lost, the better I'll like it."

Murdock got it, then. He was not yet sure that Yates had killed Farnsworth, but he knew how his own disappearance would look to the police and Bennett Thatcher and the newspapers. A half hour ago he had been avoiding the authorities; now he wished he hadn't. He said, "Not even you could square a kidnaping charge, Yates."

"Kidnaping? I think not. You came here of your own accord. I have a pleasant room upstairs that you'll find quite comfortable."

"No, thanks," Murdock said, and reached behind him for the doorknob.

Yates, not stirring in his chair, said, "Take him, boys."

They were moving, as Yates spoke, the big man first.

"Let's be nice, bub," he said, and then his hand lunged forward.

Murdock said nothing. He knew it would do no good, but he was too angry to care. He stepped inside the big hand and, moving forward, hooked hard with his right and followed through.

The fellow grunted and went backward, fighting to keep his balance. His legs caught the edge of a chair, and he sat down. But he came up fast, his face ugly, and as Murdock reached again

for the door the curly-headed youth started to pull a gun. Then the door Murdock was reaching for banged open, knocking him aside.

Jack Fenner came in fast. He had one hand in his coat pocket, and his agate eyes took in the room in a glance. Rudy Yates was still in his chair. The big man had stopped his rush, and the gun in Curlyhead's hand was still half in his pocket.

Fenner said, "Hold it, Curly!" and smiled. He did not take his hand out of his pocket. He did not have to.

Rudy Yates sat motionless in his chair, and for the first time he looked worried. The big man still glared. Curly looked defiant, but he didn't move his hand. He spoke to Yates.

"I think we could take the two of 'em," he said.

A muscle tightened in Rudy's jaw and was still. He leaned back. He spread his hands and started to smile. "I think not . . . Shut up!" he said when Curly started to bluster. "You don't know how lucky you are. All right, Jack," he said. "It's your move."

Fenner told Curly to drop his gun, and this time the youth pulled his hand out empty. Fenner removed his own hand and jerked his head at Murdock.

"Beat it," he said. "The way you came in. I'll stick around and keep Rudy company . . . See you

later, chum," he said, and winked.

Nancy Yates had a small, walk-up apartment not far from Fenner's, a shabby, gray-brick structure with uncarpeted halls and the smell of dry rot and stale food in the stairwell. Murdock, arriving at 10:30, knocked at the door, which was opened on a chain lock while he was inspected by a pair of suspicious dark eyes.

"I'm Kent Murdock," he said. "I want to talk to you about Lloyd Farnsworth."

The lashes went wide. For a moment Murdock thought she was going to slam the door. Then she said, "Just a minute," and after a brief pause she reappeared and unfastened the chain.

He thanked her, hat in hand, and went inside, hearing the door close behind him. When he turned she was leaning against the panel, her face white and her mouth set. In her right hand she held a gun and it was pointed right at him.

"You killed him," she whispered.

Murdock stood still, holding his breath. He was eight feet from the gun. He knew he could not reach it in time, and he knew from the way she held it that she was not used to guns and that was what scared him—the thought that it could easily go off before she realized it.

He quickly put on a grin and tried to speak calmly.

"You're tougher than your brother," he said. "I've just been down to see him. I guess he's been telling you that I killed Farnsworth."

"The papers say so."

"And what're you going to do with the gun? Shoot me, or turn me over to the police?" He kept his grin constant, and when she did not reply he tossed his hat aside. "You know what Rudy told me? He told me you thought *he* did it, and I'm beginning to think he did. I know one thing—he was there last night."

Nancy Yates let the muzzle waver. She moistened her lips. "I don't believe you."

"His car was out front," Murdock said, and went on to tell about the torn tickets he had found. "I guess you were going away with Farnsworth."

"I—I was," the girl said.

"You must have loved him very much."

There was no answer to this except the tears that welled up in her eyes. She tried to blink them back and could not, and finally used the back of her hand. Murdock moved slowly toward her, offering his handkerchief.

"I don't want it," the girl said and turned her head. As she did so, Murdock reached down and gently took the gun from her hand.

When he had removed the bullets he put them and the gun

on the table. She was watching him now. He produced cigarettes and handed her one. When he had given her a light he went to the couch and sat down as if it were a thing he had often done here.

She still stood at the door, a small, finely modeled girl in a skirt and blouse that made her look even younger than she was. Murdock began to talk.

"So you really think Farnsworth was in love with you," he said.

"He was."

He shook his head, smiling. "I suppose he told you he was going to marry you."

"Yes." She squared her shoulders, and her chin was set. "Next year. When he got a divorce from his wife."

"That's a long time. Why wait?"

"She was going to make a settlement. He said he'd waited this long and he might as well wait until she was thirty—that would be next year—when she got her money. Then she could pay him."

He sighed for her benefit, registering what he hoped would seem like mild amazement. "I'm a little surprised at you," he said. "You're a modern girl and you've been around a little and had a good education. You must have known about the other times and the other women who came before you. Just because he wanted to

go away with you for a while  
is no sign that—”

“Oh!” She was outraged and  
furious. “You don’t believe me?”  
she said. “Well, I’ll show you.”

And with that she hurried to  
a secretary, opened the bottom  
drawer, and took out a flat, green  
metal box measuring about nine  
by twelve inches.

“There,” she said, eyes snap-  
ping as she thrust it toward him.  
“I guess that will prove he loved  
me. He wanted me to keep it  
for him, because he trusted me  
and . . .”

Murdock did not hear the rest  
of it. He was examining the box  
and the lock, remembering now  
the keys he had taken from  
Farnsworth. He asked what was  
in it. Nancy said she didn’t know,  
she had no key.

“Maybe I have,” Murdock said.  
He produced Farnsworth’s,  
spreading them wide in his palm.  
One of them worked. He lifted  
the lid, and the girl dropped on  
the couch beside him, her head  
close to his as he began to remove  
the contents.

There were a half dozen bonds,  
some stock certificates. There was  
a red-leather notebook filled with  
names, dates, prices, and titles,  
to indicate the paintings  
Farnsworth had sold and to  
whom. There was a legal-size en-  
velope sealed with wax. On the  
face of it was the name: *Rudolph  
Yates*.

Murdock’s interest quickened.  
“What’s in that?” he demanded.

“Papers.” Nancy Yates glanced  
away.

“What kind of papers?”

“Well, you know—affidavits, I  
guess you call them. About some  
used-car business Rudy was once  
in.”

Murdock remembered the in-  
dictment against Rudy Yates, the  
case that never came to trial.  
“You mean if the District At-  
torney had these Rudy might go to  
jail? How did they get here?”

The girl flushed. She bowed her  
head, and now her voice was  
barely audible. “I—I stole them,”  
she said. “From Rudy’s desk.”  
Then, having made the admission,  
she raised her head, and the words  
rushed out. “I had to,” she said.  
“Rudy said he’d take care of  
Lloyd if I didn’t stop seeing him.  
He said he’d fix his face so no  
woman would ever look at him.  
Don’t you see I—?”

“Yes,” Murdock said grimly.  
“Rudy knew Lloyd had the envelope  
and what would happen if he bothered him. Only, last  
night, when Rudy came, the envelope wasn’t there . . . All right,”  
he said, “I guess that proves you  
loved him.”

He did not add that the envelope  
might possibly make a sec-  
ond motive for murder, but  
reached for another envelope in  
the metal box.

This one was not sealed, and

when he opened it he saw that, it contained a photograph and a photostat. He looked at the photograph first, taking in its story in a glance, and then sat there, incredulous.

For the photograph showed a sidewalk scene, a hotel entrance and part of a marquee. Leaving the entrance, arm in arm, were Rhoda Farnsworth and Dr. John Carlton in his navy lieutenant's uniform. The photostat of a registration card from a hotel in San Francisco completed the story; it was signed: *Lieut. & Mrs. John Carlton.*

Murdock calmly put the picture back in the envelope and stood up. "I'll take this," he said. "And the leather notebook." He put the other things back in the box and locked it up. "You keep this," he said. "No one knows about it but us."

At the door he shook hands with her and thanked her for her help.

"We're in it together," he said. "I want to find out who killed Lloyd Farnsworth. Do you?" He saw her nod, that odd expression still in her gaze. "You'd better think it over," he said, "because it might be your brother."

He opened the door. When he turned to close it she was still watching him, her mouth slack and fear in her eyes...

Jack Fenner put aside the

mystery book he had been reading and listened carefully to Murdock's story. When he had it all, he stood up and grunted softly, his grin crooked.

"What a guy with the dames," he said.

Murdock, busy with the drink Fenner had furnished, made no comment, and the detective began to examine Farnsworth's red-leather notebook. Presently he looked up, to eye Murdock narrowly. "You know what I think this is?"

"It's a record of sales."

"It's more than that. Rumor hath it, as we big shots often say, that Farnsworth did a bit of blackmailing. Lord knows he had opportunity enough, considering all the dames that fell for him. And my guess is that he sold a lot of painting that way." Fenner tapped the book.

"Some of these names are legitimate collectors; maybe some bought paintings because they liked them. I think a lot of women bought them because they had to, or else. But wherever Farnsworth listed more than one sale to the same person, maybe a little blackmail was the persuader. There are three people who bought two," he said, and read off the names, which meant nothing to Murdock. "One guy bought three: Dr. John Carlton."

Murdock sat up fast and held out his hand. "Let's see." He

verified the statement, and Fenner continued, "You've got two good suspects in Yates and Carlton. Both were there last night and both had motives, and I guess of the two I like Carlton's best. He's got a good practice, a nice wife, a little boy, all of which would blow higher than a kite if Farnsworth got nasty. The trouble is there are probably other people who have just as good motives that we don't know about."

He sat down with his drink, his mood reminiscent, and Murdock listened.

"I've heard plenty of stories about him," the detective said. "I don't know how true they are, but at least one dame is supposed to have committed suicide on his account, and a couple of times he was run out of town by irate husbands. He did a lot of nude jobs, so they say. I understand he'd sometimes do a nude of a lady friend and paint a different face on it so he could exhibit it. Sometimes I guess he didn't always change the face. I guess a woman might buy a picture like that later on—just to destroy it, huh?"

Fenner expected no answer. He went on; "Gene Nye had a thing in his column a couple of years ago about a husband who'd found out about one of those nudes and came up from the country to kill Farnsworth. Only, he made the

mistake of telling his wife, and she phoned Farnsworth, and before the husband could get there, Farnsworth had painted a dress on the figure. He got away with that one, but right after that some other guy chased him out of town. He went to Mexico City. Just got back a couple of months ago."

"He went to San Francisco, too," Murdock said.

Fenner lifted one brow. "Yeah, I guess he must have... Well, we still have to concentrate on Carlton and Yates. Have you heard from Thatcher?"

Murdock went to the telephone, called the lawyer, and spoke for three minutes. When he hung up he felt better. He could even smile a little. "Thatcher did all right," he said. "Tomorrow I get pinched."

"On what charge?"

"As a material witness—pending the meeting of the Grand Jury. Wyman's putting up the bail. Thatcher says it won't take more than an hour. I'm seeing him in the morning."

"Good enough," Fenner said. "Provided we crack this thing before the Grand Jury takes over. Where you going?"

Murdock had put on his hat and was reaching for his coat. "I'm going to see Rhoda."

"Now? It's almost twelve... Well, all right," Fenner said when Murdock belted the coat without

relying. "There's just one comment I'd like to make: this Rhoda is an old friend of yours. I don't know how it used to be with you, but you can hardly expect to be objective when you're listening to her troubles."

"What about it?"

"I wondered if it ever occurred to you that a woman could have beaten Farnsworth to death—yes, and slugged you. Even a little woman—if she had a heavy candlestick to work with."

Kent Murdock did not show the photograph and photostat to Rhoda Farnsworth, nor tell her how he happened to have them; he simply described them, and knew at once from her reaction that she knew all about them.

They were in the living room of her apartment overlooking the Common, and she was sitting on the sofa, her feet curled under her, her blonde hair piled high. She wore a pastel-gray hostess gown that looked custom-made. Her gray eyes were tired, like her voice.

"I wondered what had happened to them," she said.

Murdock did not like what he had to do.

"I guess Doc Carlton knew about them, too," he said. "He bought three portraits in the past couple of years. Was that the other reason why you couldn't divorce Farnsworth?"

She looked up as though not quite understanding, and he said, "You told me it was your pride that made you stay married."

"It was. For a while. I thought I knew what I was doing, and I wouldn't listen to what they said. They told me about the other girls and the things Lloyd had done and how he drank, but I couldn't make myself believe them. You see, I loved him, Kent," she said. "I suppose it was a sort of madness."

She made a little hopeless gesture. "I don't know when it was that I finally knew. I suppose it was a gradual thing, the crumpling of this spell he'd cast over me. But there was a girl from Providence and I'd come home unexpectedly from a weekend in New York and—"

Her voice broke. She controlled it quickly and said, "It doesn't matter, does it? I finally discovered that what I took to be charm and personal magnetism was nothing but evil and sadism. I should have divorced him then, but I didn't. That was where my silly pride came in. We shared the same roof, but that was all. Not until two years ago did I finally get the courage to act, and then it was too late."

"On account of the San Francisco thing?"

She nodded. "I'd been visiting a friend and was on my way home, and I ran into John Carl-

ton. He'd been there a week while his ship was being refitted, and he was lonely and so was I and—well, I liked him. I'd always liked him." She sighed. "Somehow it didn't seem wrong, then, and happened in friendship rather than in passion. It would have hurt no one if it hadn't been for Lloyd."

She went on quickly, explaining how Farnsworth had happened to see them going into the hotel and checked the register, how he waited outside all the next morning, hidden in a taxi with a camera so that he could take their picture when they came out.

"You didn't see him?" Murdock said. "Or know about it?"

"Not until later, when I told him I intended to divorce him. He showed me the photograph and the photostat of the registration that he paid a clerk to let him borrow. He said if I sued for divorce, he'd bring countersuit and offer those things as evidence... I've been paying him so much a month ever since.

"When I'm thirty I'll get perhaps three-quarters of a million, and he's agreed to give me a quiet divorce and the evidence, as he called it, for a hundred thousand. I should have been very glad to pay him," she said, "because there isn't any other way. I know Mrs. Carlton. She could not forgive John, and it would ruin his practice and his

life. He really does love her."

She raised her eyes to meet his gaze, leaning forward a little as she spoke. "Will you give them to me, Kent?"

Murdock stood up, closing his mind to the haunting sound of her voice and to the pleading gray eyes. "You're awfully worried about Carlton, aren't you?"

"Because he's an awfully nice guy."

"So am I," Murdock said. "Even you thought so once."

"I still do."

"The difference is that somebody framed me for murder; I may still get tagged with it. And Doc Carlton's car was outside Farnsworth's place last night when I came out."

"Yes." Rhoda said. "I phoned him the minute I left you last night and asked him to hurry out there."

"Also, Carlton has a damned good motive and has been paying blackmail and—" Murdock stopped as the import of what she just said came to him. He leaned forward, staring hard. "What did you say?"

"I said I phoned John."

"And told him about the call I'd just got from Farnsworth?"

"Why, yes. Because I was afraid of what you might do, and I thought maybe John could do something to stop it."

She went on talking, but Murdock did not hear her. For he

knew where Carlton lived, and was figuring how long it would take him to drive from there to Farnsworth's place, how long it had taken him, Murdock, to walk it, knowing now that here was one man who definitely had the chance to frame him.

His thoughts left his lean face hard, and Rhoda stood up, her gaze uncertain.

"What is it, Kent?"

"Nothing," he said. "It's all right. I'll make a deal with you," he said as he reached for his hat. "If Carlton can clear himself, you can have the pictures. If he happens to be the boy I'm looking for, he'll stand trial for murder, and then the pictures won't matter much, will they?"

He did not look at her when he had finished. He couldn't. He walked swiftly across the room, into the foyer, and let himself out.

Bennett Thatcher's estimate of the time it would take to surrender Kent Murdock and have him freed on bail was reasonably accurate. For in just seventy-five minutes Murdock was formally arrested, appeared in court before a waiting judge, and saw the bail of \$5,000 supplied by T. A. Wyman.

This done, he headed for police headquarters, and, bypassing Lieutenant Bacon's office, went directly to the Bureau of Records and consulted the sergeant in

charge. An hour later he had found a file photograph that satisfied him, noting that the record attached listed eight arrests on charges of extortion and assault, and one conviction.

"Guy Vernon," the sergeant said. "Meathead, they call him: Meathead Vernon."

"Did he ever work for Rudy Yates?"

"Sure. Up to a couple of years ago he was one of Rudy's regulars."

Murdock thanked the sergeant, and before he quit the building he left word with the proper official that he would sign a complaint against Vernon if the police would be good enough to pick him up. The official said he would pass the word along.

After that, Murdock went to the *Times-Clarion* and tried to work, but it was no good. Too many of his friends came into the studio and asked too many questions. What at first had been merely embarrassing became increasingly annoying as time went on.

He finally explained things to Wyman and the City Editor over the phone, and they told him to go home and take it easy.

His apartment had a stale, flat smell, but it seemed good to be back. He stripped, shaved, and took a hot shower followed by a cold one.

When he had dressed he

telephoned Jack Fenner at his office and spoke of Meathead Vernon. Fenner said he knew that individual and would see what could be done to locate him. Murdock hung up and called Rudy Yates. He wasted no preliminaries. "I'm looking for Meathead Vernon," he said.

"That's interesting," Rudy Yates drawled.

"He used to work for you. I thought maybe you'd know where he is."

"Haven't seen him in months."

"But you get around. You have friends who get around," Murdock continued, his voice clipped and direct. "If you locate him, have him phone me. If you don't, I think I can dig up some new evidence for the D.A. in that used-car case that never came to trial."

He hesitated. When there was no answer, nor any disconnecting click, he knew that he had scored. He hung up as Rudy Yates' was thinking it over . . .

The drone of the door buzzer heralded further developments shortly before ten that evening. Yet he was not prepared for what followed, because the man who stood in the hall was Dr. John Carlton.

Carlton's brown eyes were steady and unsmiling. He wore a gray homburg. His Oxford-gray coat was unbuttoned and he kept his hands in his pockets as he walked in. He waited until Mur-

dock had closed the door, and then he said, "I suppose you know why I've come."

Murdock knew all right. His mind had been racing from the instant he opened the door, for the things he saw in the tight, round face had already warned him of trouble.

"I can guess," he said. "You've been talking to Rhoda, and she told you about the photograph and stuff."

"I came to get them."

"Okay," Murdock sounded as if this was unimportant. He said, "I was about to make a drink."

"I'd like the photograph first."

Murdock studied his caller. About thirty-three, he thought, sandy-haired, just beginning to put on weight after a year and a half of civilian practice. A practice, Murdock knew, that was doing nicely, owing largely to the prominence and social standing of his wife.

"Are you going to give them to me?" The words cut sharply across Murdock's thoughts.

"No," he said flatly.

"I think you are," Carlton said, and he took a revolver from his pocket.

Murdock looked at it, his eyes dark with scorn. "Either I give you the stuff or you shoot, is that it? And then where'll you be?"

"I don't have to shoot to kill." Carlton hesitated, and for the first

time seemed uncertain. "A bullet in the leg would put you down and give me a chance to search you, and every inch of this apartment."

"And for that you'd probably get five years."

"It would be worth it."

Murdock looked at him hard, measuring the whiteness of the mouth and the desperation in the eyes, and knew that Carlton meant what he said.

"Maybe it would," Kent said. "I guess Mrs. Carlton would be very much interested to know the real reason why you bought three of Farnsworth's portraits."

"Give me that photograph," Carlton said, and took a step forward.

Murdock shook his head, his anger riding him again. "You've made a stupid play, Doc. You forgot one thing. You forgot that to have a photostat made you have to have an original, and the original of that hotel card you signed is still in the hotel files. I haven't got the things you want," he added, deciding a lie would do no harm, "but if I had and you took them, the minute you closed the door I'd call police headquarters. I'd tell them all about the motive you had for murdering Lloyd Farnsworth and show them how they could prove it by checking with the hotel."

He stood up. "Now beat it," he said. "And if you bother me

again I think I'll tell the police the truth, anyway, just for the hell of it—" He broke off as the telephone rang and walked quickly to the table in the inner hall.

"Murdock?" said a low, hoarse voice he did not recognize. "Meathead Vernon. I hear you been looking for me."

Murdock glanced over his shoulder. John Carlton was still standing there, the gun in his hand but no longer leveled. Murdock said, "Yes," into the telephone, hunching over it, so he would not have to speak very loud. "Where are you?"

"That comes later," the voice said, "depending on how loud your money talks. I may have to take a quick powder, and I could use some fresh scratch. What're you offering?"

Murdock thought fast, mentally counting his cash, and said he could raise a hundred dollars; possibly more later. He listened while Vernon gave him an address, repeated it to make sure he had it correct.

"Yes, I've got it," he said. Second floor, over the paint shop."

"And get this," Vernon said. "It'll be dark up there on account I'm going to be watching for you. Anyone comes with you, or follows you, the deal is off."

"Don't worry," Murdock began.

"I won't. Come upstairs, walk

in the door on the right, and wait. If it looks okay to me I'll be in."

The telephone clicked off, and Murdock turned back to the living room. He was heading for his hat and coat when he remembered John Carlton. Intent on his telephone conversation he had heard no other sound. Now, to his surprise, the room was empty. And he was suddenly grateful that there was no need for further argument.

He called Fenner and told him where he was going. Fenner wanted to give him a five-minute lead, then follow, but Murdock talked him out of it. Meathead might have a lookout, who would spot Fenner, and this was one interview Murdock didn't want interrupted.

He had to walk to Boylston before he found a taxi, and then rode out Huntington for a couple of miles, turned left finally, and told the driver to stop in a block of one- and two-story neighborhood stores, now dark and deserted.

Across the street he saw a bakery and a meat market, and the paint store next to it. Above this, three windows of the second-floor flat mirrored blackly the street shadows. There was no light behind them, but there was a faint glow beyond the doorway, and as Murdock crossed the street he saw that there was a light of some

kind in the second-floor hall.

He was thankful for this as he climbed the stairs, but when he reached the hall he stopped and listened. He did not know why.

He took a step and then another, heels echoing hollowly on the bare boards. He passed under the dangling ceiling light, and on some impulse reached up and unscrewed the hot bulb.

"Just to even things up," he told himself, and felt better as the thick blackness settled about him. He walked on, groping for the door, the tightness spreading through him and every nerve alert.

He found the doorknob and went in fast, stepping aside as he slammed the door behind him. It was well that he did, though it was probably his precaution with the light that saved him.

For, in that next instant, it happened.

There was no real sound; rather, it was a whisper of some sound, the shadow of some movement ahead of him in the dark room.

He moved instantly—away from the menace of that shadow, throwing himself sideways and down as a gun blasted the silence and a pencil-point of light flicked out at him.

Three times the hammering came before he hit the floor, and he was not hurt, but knew there were other shells left and did the

one thing he thought might save him.

He groaned twice, miserably. He caught his breath and let it out in a loud sigh that was drawn-out, final. Then he lay still.

There was a thin, rough carpet beneath him. The fingers of his right hand touched a chair leg. He curled his fingers around it, hoping the chair would be light enough to handle quickly. Then he heard the sound of movement to his left, the measured, faintly brushing sound of steps on the carpet.

It was hard to stay there, to lie so still.

The sound of the steps came to him again, closer, but not close enough. They were passing him on the left. He waited, ears straining for some new sound.

When it came it surprised him. He heard the click as the door opened, and then the metallic thud of some heavy object striking the floor in the direction of the windows. After that, the door closed.

He raised his head, pulled himself to his knees, and let go of the chair leg, puzzled but weak with relief. On his feet now, he oriented himself in the blackness and then stepped toward the windows.

Outside, the street stretched emptily below him. A car raced across the intersection a half block away, and then the quiet came again. He realized he was

too late. His man was gone.

For another moment or two he stood there, the perspiration dampening his face and leaking down his sides. Then he groped his way back across the room and found the light switch by the door.

He snapped it on, blinking against the brightness. Then he saw Meathead Vernon.

Meathead was sitting on the floor, legs bowed and the sides of his knees touching the carpet. His thick torso was leaning back against a shabby couch, and he had been shot twice in the chest.

Three feet away a revolver lay on the floor, and Murdock knelt beside it. It was a cheap, nickel-plated model of a forgotten era, and it was this that the killer had thrown down as he left the room.

When Murdock saw that the cylinder had been designed to hold five bullets he realized why the man had not lingered. He had shot Vernon twice and kept the other three slugs for Murdock, leaving the empty gun for the police to find and interpret as they pleased.

The thought of this shocked Murdock anew. He straightened. He got out a cigarette and lit it with trembling fingers. He walked up to Vernon and made sure he was dead; then he glanced slowly about the grubby, cheaply furnished room until he spotted the telephone.

He walked over and picked it up. Because he had nothing to lose he asked for police headquarters. When he had spoken his piece he dialed the *Times-Clarion* number, telling the City Editor to send out a reporter and a camera.

Kent Murdock had plenty of time to think during the next twelve hours. There were intervals during the police investigation of the Vernon murder when he could isolate his thoughts and work on them, and there was additional time as he lay in bed trying to go to sleep. His brain took up the matter when he awakened the next morning, and by that time a pattern heretofore obscured began to reveal itself.

To clarify this pattern he went first to police headquarters, where he talked with Lieutenant Bacon and certain laboratory experts, and from there to one of the other city officials. At the *Times-Clarion* he checked assignments and made sure they were being covered, and then went upstairs and talked at length to some of the reporters before going into the library for further research.

After lunch he went to the *Bulletin* offices and sought out Gene Nye, the gossip columnist, who became readily cooperative and later took him into the "morgue" and told the librarian to give Murdock anything he

wanted. As a result, it was nearly five when he telephoned Jack Fenner and said he would require the detective's services that evening. After that he called Thatcher.

The lawyer was still at his office and he was immediately agreeable when Murdock outlined his plan. "I've found out quite a few things since I talked to you," Murdock said. "And if we're going to have a session with the Grand Jury next week I think you ought to know them. I want to get some people up to your place tonight and I want you to sit in while I chase them out in the open."

"I think it's a good idea," Thatcher said. "Who're you asking?"

Murdock told him, then said, "I wanted to be sure it was all right with you, and if so I thought maybe you would phone them. You carry more weight than I do."

"You talk as if you had something we could use."

"I have," Murdock said, "I hope."

And so at nine o'clock that evening Murdock and Jack Fenner, accompanied by a young *Times-Clarion* photographer named Eddie Geiger, pulled up in front of Thatcher's residence and piled out of the car. Other cars were already parked at the curb.

They were approaching the

steps, when Fenner stopped suddenly and peered into the shadows.

"Come out of that!" he ordered; and then the bushes moved and out stepped a tall, slim figure, which, exposed to the light, proved to be that of a good-looking, bareheaded youth, wrapped in a camel's-hair coat.

"What're you doing there?" asked Fenner, taking an arm and turning the youth roughly. "What's your name?"

"Ah—Wordell," the youth said. "I'm a friend of—that is, I was just—"

"It's all right," Murdock said, remembering the name and its association. "You're a friend of Nancy Yates? . . . Good. You might as well come in."

The others were all there when Murdock stopped in the drawing-room doorway: Thatcher, spare and tall, stood in front of the fireplace, talking to Rhoda Farnsworth and Dr. Carlton, who sat on the nearby sofa; Nancy Yates and her brother, Rudy, occupied the matching sofa on the other side of the fireplace; but apparently they were not speaking, for each stared straight ahead. Murdock spoke to Eddie Geiger, turning so the others could not hear.

"Make yourself small, Eddie," he said. "I'll tell you when we're ready."

Then, as he started into the

room, Nancy Yates saw Wordell, and her small mouth tightened. "You followed me," she said irritably.

Wordell colored, spoke defensively. "I wanted to know what was going on and—"

Murdock cut him off. "It's all right," he said. "I don't think she needs to stay."

"I don't mind," the girl said. "I'd like to stay." And then her words trailed off, and Murdock had her by the arm and was walking her toward the door, signaling young Wordell to follow. The bickering of young people had no place in his plan.

Rudy Yates, complete with dinner jacket and carnation, was standing up when Murdock returned to the living room. "How long is this going to take?" Rudy said. "I've got to get back to the Club. And what's this about my sister?"

Murdock sat down where he could watch both sofas, noting that Jack Fenner had taken a chair near the doorway.

"I wanted your sister to corroborate certain statements of mine," he said, "but maybe you'll take my word for them. If not, we can ask her later." He glanced at Thatcher. "I thought you ought to know about this: Lloyd Farnsworth had a green metal box. He kept some of his personal papers in it, and he gave it to Nancy Yates for safekeeping. She

showed it to me the other night and I happened to have a key that opened it."

Thatcher nodded as Murdock elaborated. He made notes on a pad of paper he had on the mantel, and Murdock went on, "In that box was an envelope containing some affidavits concerning a black-market indictment on a used-car syndicate. The case never came to trial, but Rudy knows what it's all about. He also knows how Farnsworth got the envelope. I can tell you about that when we discuss it later," he said, and watched the muscles harden in Rudy's flushed face.

Then he continued, "My point is that the envelope made an additional motive for murder. His sister was in love with Farnsworth, and she was going to Florida with him. Rudy found it out and went up there the other night and tore up the Pullman tickets."

"Who says so besides you?"

"The police," Murdock said, and met Rudy's angry stare with steady eyes. "They picked up those pieces and went over them for latent fingerprints, and found yours."

Thatcher made a note of that, nodding, his thin face impassive except for the observant eyes.

"Rudy's car was parked out front when I went in," Murdock continued. "It was gone when I came out."

"So what?" said Rudy. "So what if I did tear up the tickets?" His voice was tight now. "When I finished with Farnsworth I needed a drink. I remembered a bar a block and a half away, and I wasn't sure I'd find a place to park when I got there, so I left the car and walked. I got my drink and came back."

"Can you prove it?" Murdock waited, and when no answer came he glanced at Rhoda Farnsworth and John Carlton. "There was something else in that box," he said to Thatcher, "that concerned Carlton and Mrs. Farnsworth."

Carlton stiffened and seemed about to speak. As though sensing this, the woman put her hand on his arm. She was sitting very straight now, her face pale but composed, her gray eyes somehow no longer afraid. It was as though she realized she must finally pay for her mistake and had found sufficient inner courage to make the ordeal bearable.

Murdock had to look away. He swallowed and his face was hot as he glanced again at Thatcher.

"I can tell you the details later," he said, "but for now you can take my word for it that Carlton had a compelling motive for killing Farnsworth, and Mrs. Farnsworth had the same strong motive; because she was involved and blamed herself for what happened." He took a breath and said, "She was with me when I

got the phone call from Farnsworth the night he was killed, and as soon as I left she called Carlton."

Murdock went on, explaining how he had found Carlton in his car when he came out.

"The car wasn't there when I went in," he said. "But it could have been parked around the corner. Later, after he had tipped off the police, he could have come back to watch."

"Do you deny this?" Thatcher asked, looking at Carlton.

The doctor cleared his throat, but his voice was thick. "Not all of it. Mrs. Farnsworth phoned me, yes. But when I went to get my car I found I had a flat. I went up there as soon as I changed it, and I had no more than got there when the police car came. I didn't know what had happened, but whatever it was I knew I was too late. So I went home."

Murdock stood up. He nodded to Fenner and to Eddie Geiger, who waited with his camera in the corner. "I can tell you the rest of it privately," he said to Thatcher, and gestured toward the study door.

Thatcher caught his meaning. "If you'll excuse us," he said to the others, and led the way, closing the door when Murdock had entered. He waved the photographer to a chair opposite the desk and settled himself in the one behind it.

"That's very interesting," he said. "All of it."

"I wanted you to hear it," Murdock said. "I wanted you to know what I was up against, once I really got down to thinking things out. I didn't get anywhere at all until Vernon was killed last night. This morning I thought I had three real suspects, and then, when I got working on it I decided there was really only one."

"Three?" Thatcher let his brows climb. "Rudy Yates, John Carlton, and—Mrs. Farnsworth?"

"Not Mrs. Farnsworth."

Thatcher let the brows go higher. "Not young Wordell, nor Miss Yates, certainly?"

"No."

"Then who?"

"You," Murdock said.

Thatcher let his brows come down. He squinted across the desk at Murdock, his intent bright eyes revealing nothing. Finally he leaned back and chuckled. "You're not serious."

"You know I'm serious. You killed Farnsworth and Meathead Vernon, and if you'd taken a little more time you'd have killed me."

Thatcher passed a palm over his thinning gray-brown hair. His lips grew flat and colorless, and his voice got cold and sardonic, the way it always did when he tore into a courtroom opponent. "If you thought so," he said, "you would have come with the police."

Murdock shook his head. "I

think this way is better. I had the others "come"—he nodded toward the drawing room—"because I wanted to show you their motives, and why I finally had to throw them out and settle for you."

"Why did you—throw them out?"

Murdock took his time. His dark gaze was steady, his face composed; but inside he was jumpy because he was not sure his plan would work. Concentrating on the job before him he said, "Both Yates and Carlton knew Farnsworth had photographs of documents that would ruin them. With Carlton, it meant ruining his life; with Yates, it meant a jail sentence. They probably did not know where Farnsworth kept these things, but to kill him without getting them would be stupid, since on his death the evidence would surely come to light... I can understand them killing for this evidence; I can understand Yates losing his head over his sister's infatuation and beating Farnsworth to death, anyway."

"But he didn't."

"No," Murdock said. "Because if he had—or if Carlton had—he would have looked for what he wanted. He would not have found it, because it wasn't there, but he would have looked."

Murdock leaned forward, measuring his words. "I had a

chance to go over Farnsworth's apartment before the police came. It hadn't been searched. The center desk drawer was locked, but the others were neat and no attempt had been made to search them. And that's why I say neither of them killed him."

He hurried on before the lawyer could interrupt. "The man who killed him and framed me wasn't looking for papers or photographs; he was looking for just one thing—revenge. The trouble with me is that sometimes I'm not very bright. I didn't realize the importance of this until this morning. Oh, I knew I'd been framed, all right. The trouble was I didn't realize I'd been framed from the start."

He paused, but Thatcher had nothing to offer, so he said, "I guess you'd wanted to kill Farnsworth for a long time, Mr. Thatcher. And the other day you found the right way. You heard about the business at the Flamingo—or maybe you were there—and you knew I'd been seeing Rhoda Farnsworth, and you hired Meathead Vernon to do a job on me. You coached him in what to say, and you were providentially at hand to assist me and plant the idea that maybe it wasn't a mugging, while you suggested indirectly that perhaps Farnsworth was behind it. You took me to police headquarters, knowing I'd tell my story, and

I think probably you waited outside and followed me home.

"After that you went to Farnsworth's with a gun, held it in his back, and made him telephone me and say what you told him to say. I doubt if he had the faintest idea of what he was doing. He was taunting me to come up and finish a job he knew nothing about, and when he hung up you hit him over the head with that candlestick. Then you finished him off and got ready for me."

Murdock laughed, an abrupt and bitter sound. "I was a pushover, wasn't I? Walked in, hotheaded, thinking Farnsworth and I were going to have it out, and you lowered the boom on me. You marked me up, skinned my knuckles, and walked out; if it hadn't been for a little break you would have got away with it."

"If the police had arrived a little sooner," Thatcher began.

"That wasn't what I meant," Murdock said. "I guess you had to get far enough away so no one would remember you before you went into a pay station to tip off the police; but the break I'm talking about is the taxi that came around the corner that first night and caught Meathead Vernon in its lights long enough for me to identify him . . . That did it, I guess," he said. "Once I knew who he was—and it was

a cinch I'd find out, eventually—you had to kill him, too. And when you did, I knew Farnsworth hadn't hired him. I knew I'd been played for a sucker from the start."

Bennett Thatcher did not move. His narrowed, half-sleepy eyes never strayed from Murdock's face, but now, when he spoke, his voice had lost its bite. His tone grew softly speculative. "You said I'd probably wanted to kill Farnsworth for a long time. What makes you think so, and why didn't I?"

"Farnsworth had been back a couple of months," Murdock said. "I don't know why you waited, unless you wanted an ideal setup, but you didn't kill him before that because he wasn't in town. I think you tried to get him once before, didn't you, Mr. Thatcher? I think you've wanted to kill him ever since *the summer your wife committed suicide*—because of Farnsworth and the nude portrait he painted of her."

Kent leaned toward the desk, reaching for the telephone. "And before we go into that," he said, "it might be a good idea to get the police in and let them listen."

Murdock did not touch the telephone. His fingers were still a foot away from it when Thatcher's hand moved up from behind the desk and leveled an automatic across it. Murdock saw it coming; but he did not watch

the gun; he kept his eyes on the lawyer's thin, gray face, seeing the dampness on the forehead and the way the man's jaw sagged before he tightened it.

He leaned back in his chair and let his breath out slowly, the fear beginning to build inside him—not just because of the gun, but because, having gone this far, he knew there was no turning back, nor any way out for him if he failed.

He had come here to put on his act with little more than native shrewdness to guide him, plus a psychology of his own that came from his long experience in meeting and studying people. He had facts, yes. But until this moment he had not been sure his analysis had been correct. He pretended the gun was unimportant.

"I don't think you'll need that," he said.

Thatcher did not seem to hear him. "You're right about Meathead Vernon," he said. "He was a stupid man. Someone—I believe it was Rudy Yates—got word to him yesterday afternoon that you were looking for him. He was pretty jittery when he phoned me, so I made a date with him. I told him the thing to do was telephone you and get you to his place and then take care of you. He believed me."

"He didn't talk like a man with a gun in his back," Murdock said. "He sounded as if he meant what

he said, and when he hung up you shot him twice. How come you missed me?"

"I don't know." Thatcher shifted his gun and wet his lips. "I didn't think I did. You gave a most convincing demonstration of a dying man. Perhaps I was confused and shot at your shadow," he said, and then his mouth dipped at the corners and his voice got sardonic again. "I think you are a little stupid, too, Murdock, for coming here like this."

"I could have come with a gun," Murdock said. "I've got Jack Fenner outside, in any case."

"He can hardly help you now."

"I don't need any help."

Murdock's voice was direct, forceful, and convincing. His confidence made Thatcher pause. "I don't follow you," the lawyer said.

"You think you've got two moves," Murdock said. "You can shoot me first and then shoot yourself—before Fenner does—or you can surrender and gamble as a lawyer that I haven't sufficient proof to convince you. All right; I'm offering you a *third* way, and I think you'll take it."

"Why should I, assuming there is a third way?"

Murdock hesitated, knowing that his life depended on what he said. "I'll have to tell this my way," he began. "It'll take a little while and I probably can't tell it in a straight line. I'll even have to guess at some things, but

you'll know if I'm right or not."

He paused, arranging his thoughts, and said, "It started this morning, when I knew that Farnsworth had not hired Vernon, when I realized that neither Yates nor Carlton would have killed Farnsworth without searching for the things they wanted so badly. I began at the *Times-Clarion*," he said. "A newspaper is like a library, in a way. In its files is a history of the territory it serves and its people. Some papers call such departments 'morgues.'

"You see, I didn't know your wife. So I started digging. I talked with reporters who had covered her death and who knew you. I used the *Bulletin's* morgue and I talked with Gene Nye, who's been covering scandal and gossip for the last ten years. And this is the picture I got.

"Your wife was twenty-two years younger than you were when she married you. She came from a good middle-class family. Her folks didn't have much money, but they scraped together enough to send her to a small girls' school. They were old-fashioned, too, the way they brought her up. They were very strict. They did not encourage boy friends, and I doubt if she ever had much fun. She never really knew what boys were like, and when she got out of school she didn't know men."

"Then you came along. You

had money, position, a distinguished name, and when she married you, you became the first man in her life; the only one—until Farnsworth.

"You worshiped her in your fashion, but you were strict, too, like her folks, because you were jealous and afraid. You could give her all the material things she'd ever want, but because you were so much older you worried about other things, the sort of things a man cannot buy. You were less sure of yourself than a younger man, and always you knew how beautiful she was. You saw the way other men looked at her when you were out, and you watched her, trying not to think of what might happen if she found someone she liked better."

"Well, she found the guy, finally, Farnsworth. There's no point in going into why she fell for him. He had the sort of charm that had fooled older and wiser women than your wife, and she had nothing in her experience that could help her, because she had known no one but you."

"You said your wife gave you that portrait for your birthday. That's a lie... You said she died two months later, and that also is a lie. I'll tell you what happened, Thatcher. And these are facts, a matter of record."

"On the first of three successive days during that summer you bought that portrait." He digressed

ed to tell of Farnsworth's red-leather notebook that listed the dates of his sales. "On the second day your wife committed suicide, and on the third Farnsworth left town."

"My wife died accidentally," Thatcher said, his voice husky, but the gun steady.

"Your wife committed suicide, and you know it. Look." Murdock sat up. "I've got friends at police headquarters and at the medical examiner's office. Doc Eggn didn't want to talk today until I told him how important it was. He would never repeat what he told me on a witness stand, perhaps, but he knows."

"Because of your name and position, and because there was no insurance company involved, nor any question of murder, he accepted your story that your wife suffered from migraine, had awakened after taking some pills, and not remembering, had taken more. He says there was no suicide note—if there was, you grabbed it—but from the number of pills taken he's convinced it was suicide."

He saw Thatcher lean across the desk and tighten his hand on the gun.

"You're smarter than I thought, Murdock," he said. "The trouble is, you're too smart. If I stand trial I guess what you say will come out. I don't want it that way. I made up my mind that

no one would ever speak evil of my wife. I gambled and I lost, and it looks as if I'll have to pay. I can do that, too, Murdock, but first I'm going to make sure you never talk about my wife or her reputation."

Murdock knew he meant it, knew he had only one chance left. "No," he said, and shook his head. "I told you there was a third way, Thatcher, and this is it: you're going to write out a confession and sign it."

For the first time Thatcher faltered. "Why?" he said slowly.

Murdock got ready to move should the trigger finger tighten. He said, "Because if you don't, there'll be a picture of your wife on the front page of the *Times-Clarion*, which will show her as she was when Farnsworth painted her portrait—without the dress, without anything."

He went quickly on before the lawyer could interrupt. "I was with the AMG in Italy as a Monument Officer. We had to do with preserving art treasures and looking up stolen pictures. We developed an improvement on the infrared method of photographing paintings so that we could be sure just what was underneath the picture on top. In the case of an oil, once the original picture has dried, it will show up, even though another coat of paint has been applied . . . You saw the photographer I brought with me,

didn't you? Well, what do you think he's been doing?"

Without moving, Bennett Thatcher seemed to sag, as though all the strength had gone from his body. "How did you know?" he asked hoarsely.

Murdock began to breathe again. He watched the gun waver and dip. He moved his legs, and they felt weak and nerveless as he explained how Jack Fenner had told him the rumors about the woman who committed suicide, how Farnsworth had painted a dress on a nude portrait while an irate husband was rushing up from the country.

"I hooked the two incidents up," he said, "after I'd talked with Gene Nye and the medical examiner. And then I went on from there."

Thatcher put the gun on the desk, but kept his hand on it. "Where's the photographer you brought?"

"He should be back at the office. He's supposed to phone me."

"What about the people in the drawing room?"

"There are no people in the drawing room. They've gone. Only Fenner's there now."

The tension had gone from Thatcher's face, leaving it flaccid and resigned. He sighed, and there was weariness and regret in the sound. Presently one corner of his mouth curled in a smile that was sardonic but without malice.

"I suppose you know I had every intention of killing you."

"It was a chance I had to take," Murdock said. "You protected your wife's name and reputation two years ago, and you've protected it since. I had an idea, feeling as you did about her, that you'd want to go on protecting her."

"You're right, of course." Thatcher unlocked a desk drawer and took out a folded sheet of paper. He struck a match, touched the flame to the paper, and as it burned in the ashtray he said, "That was the note she left me."

He took out a small bottle, half filled with little pills.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I was the irate husband. She'd been seeing Farnsworth for over three months when I discovered it. I knew what he was like, and I'd heard about the nudes he sometimes did. I didn't accuse her then, but I said I was going up and find out. She must have telephoned him the minute I left—we were on the Cape that summer and it took me two hours to drive it—because when I got there the picture I saw was the one I now have over the mantel."

He said, "I bought it on the spot, gave him a check, and called the express company to have it delivered. I did nothing more, then, but I was nearly out of my mind, thinking of the time it had taken her to pose for him

and how they had been together."

He fell silent, distance in his gaze. After a minute he exhaled softly and said, "What happened then was my fault. I was tortured by jealousy and rage and I accused her of everything I could think of. I guess she must have still been infatuated with him, because finally she turned on me. She became hysterical—I had driven her too far—and suddenly she not only admitted everything but taunted me with Farnsworth's cleverness in painting the dress on the portrait. I hadn't known until then, you see, but she told me how she'd posed and said she was glad.

"I got a gun. I brought her to town with me. I took her upstairs and locked her in her room and told her I was going to kill him... I would have," he said, "if I could have found him. I looked for hours, until nearly daylight, and then I came back and found her unconscious, with the note on the table. I drove her to the hospital, but she was too far gone; they couldn't save her." He rubbed his hand over his face and said, "The next day when I went looking for him I found he'd left town."

The telephone rang as he finished and he picked it up. "For you," he said!

Murdock said, "Hello," and listened to what Eddie Geiger had to say. He put his hand over the

mouthpiece and turned to Thatcher.

"Has he developed the negatives?"

"No. His orders were to develop them only in case I didn't show up."

"Then he doesn't know," Thatcher said. "No one knows but you and me? How much time do I have?"

Murdock thought it over. "An hour after I leave with your confession."

"And I have your word that you will destroy the negatives?... Very well. It's a deal."

Murdock spoke into the telephone. "Okay, Eddie," he said. "Just sit tight until I get there... No, I don't want them developed." He put the telephone aside and found Thatcher examining the bottle of pills.

"I guess we can't use these," the lawyer said. "With this new benzedrine antidote they'd probably pull me out of it." He stood up, taking the gun with him. He got some paper and walked to the typewriter table in the corner. "Do you want to write it, or shall I?"

"You write it," Murdock said. "You're a lawyer and you know how to make it stand up. You don't have to put in anything about your wife—just say the motive was a personal one that developed between you and

Farnsworth since he returned. Tell how and why you framed me, and how and why you had to kill Meathead Vernon. I'll settle for that—the police will, too."

Thatcher sat down and began to write. For five minutes he hammered steadily at the typewriter; then he glanced up.

"I want you to know one thing," he said. "I never intended that you should pay with your life for Farnsworth's murder. With the setup I had I felt pretty sure I could get you an acquittal, and if T. A. Wyman hadn't called me in I would have offered my services." He grunted softly, a disparaging sound. "Most men in a spot like that would have been satisfied with an acquittal, but you had a stubbornness and integrity I hadn't counted on. You had to have a clean bill."

He sighed again and bent over to type again . . .

Jack Fenner rode back to the *Times-Clarion* with Murdock, but he went only as far as the corner bar. Here they had a quick one and said good night, and then Murdock went to the studio. Eddie Geiger was waiting, and when he had turned over the film-holder Murdock told him he could go home.

That left him alone in the studio, and he took the two-page confession from his pocket and read it once more before opening

the film-holder and exposing the negatives. He got out his lighter, touched the flame to the film, and watched it sputter and curl up into ash. He took the photograph of Rhoda Farnsworth and Dr. Carlton and added it to the fire, and when it was going again he put on the photostat of the hotel register.

When the flame and smoke were gone, he lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. He thought about Nancy Yates and young Wordell. He was happy that Rhoda Farnsworth could have another chance. He tried not to think about Bennett Thatcher, for he knew that before the night was over, the police would find him dead, slumped over his desk, and the papers would pounce on the story.

He was glad he would not have to cover the case. Tomorrow he could be philosophical and know that this was much the best way for everyone concerned, even for Thatcher; but tonight he felt lousy, and he knew that presently he would go home and have a few drinks in the hope that he could forget for a little while everything that had happened.

But first there was another job to do. He glanced at his watch. Then, because he had no choice but to face the issue as he would any other unpleasant assignment, he picked up the telephone and asked for police headquarters.

# **Robert L. Fish**

## **The Adventure of the Counterfeit Sovereign**

*The Master Manhunter, the Supersleuth, the Detective Defective of 221B Bagel Street, rides again! All hail to the Sherlockian Don Quixote and his Holmesian Sancho Panza . . .*

### **Detective: SCHLOCK HOMES**

**I**T WAS A GREY, WINDY DAY IN mid-April of '62 when I returned from my medical rounds and climbed the stairs to our rooms at 221B Bagel Street to find my friend Mr. Schlock Homes bending excitedly over an impressive array of test-tubes, retorts, and similar chemical apparatus. Knowing his dislike of being disturbed while engaged in his researches, I quietly found myself a seat to one side and watched with interest as his fingers reached for a bit of litmus paper.

"You have arrived at a crucial moment, Watney!" said he, his keen eyes glittering. "If this litmus paper remains blue, all is well. If it turns red—then I am afraid we shall have to depend upon store-bought whisky for our afternoon libations!"

He turned back to his task and a moment later lifted his head

in triumph, the still-azure strip dripping onto the carpet. Rinsing his hands he dried them carefully upon his dressing-gown and flung himself into a chair.

"And none too soon!" he added in a pleased tone, "for we are to receive a distinguished guest shortly, and I fear that in my preoccupation with my last case I have allowed our liquor stocks to reduce themselves to a bit of Mrs. Essex's cooking sherry, and nothing more."

"A distinguished guest, Homes?" I asked, mystified.

In lieu of answering he handed me a telegraph-form and watched me closely as I read it. It was a request for a consultation with Homes, and I noted automatically that the hour for the appointment was nearly upon us. The form was signed quite simply: Hans Wolfgang Wilhelm Hermann Adolph von Saxe-Homburg,

Grand Duke of Kitzle-Farbstein,  
King of Belgravia.

There was something faintly familiar in the signature and I looked up to see Homes nodding at me as, in his inexplicable fashion, he answered my unspoken thoughts.

"Yes," he said, smiling. "It is the same. You may recall that I was fortunate enough to be of service to his Majesty before, in the matter of those incriminating letters I was able to recover from Polly Ad—" He paused. "But no names!"

His eye fell upon the mantel clock and he sprang to his feet. "I must dress!" he exclaimed. "If you would be so kind as to handle the conventions, I'll be back in a moment!"

He had no more than disappeared when the sound of a four-in-hand drawing up to the kerb could be heard, and a moment later the heavy tread of boots came tramping up the stairs. The door was flung open and I found myself facing a man fully seven feet in height, dressed in regal mink slashed with sable. The rich brocade of his ruffled silk shirt-front was pinned at the throat by a large crest carved from a single opal, while his astrakhan-trimmed boots were banded by small emeralds embedded in the leather. Across the broad chest ran a diagonal swath of purple marten carrying a veritable host

of medals. But the most surprising feature of his appearance was the thin strip of black mask that hid the upper portion of his face, although it could scarcely conceal the famous Kitzle-Farbstein nose.

"Your Majesty—" I began, overwhelmed by the royal presence, but before I could continue, he raised a large gloved hand imperiously.

"Please!" he said in a deep rich voice with but the faintest trace of accent. "I come here incognito! To everyone I must be plain Mr. Kitzle for this brief period" He paused, peering at me with difficulty through the narrow slits of his mask. "But you are not Homes!"

His hand flew to the jeweled dagger at his hip, but I was saved the necessity of defending myself by the drawling voice of my friend from the doorway.

"No, Mr. Kitzle," said Homes, advancing further into the room. "This is my old friend Dr. Watney, and whatever you have to say may be said freely in his presence, as he is remarkably inattentive."

The gloved hand fell away from the dagger and I found myself breathing normally once again. Homes waved our guest graciously to a seat and sank into one opposite while I repaired to the test-tubes and began mixing drinks.

"You must forgive me," said his Majesty apologetically. "I have

recently had the strangest adventure, and I still find myself a bit unnerved. It is precisely for this reason, Mr. Homes, that I requested an interview, for I should appreciate your advice on the entire matter."

Homes leaned forward politely. "As always, Mr. Kitzle," he replied, "I am at your complete service. Please favor us with the details."

"Well, Mr. Homes," said our visitor, sitting forward and accepting a drink, "as you know, I am addicted to fox-hunting, not—as so many of your countrymen—for the sport, but because I have found that a good fox-fur makes up into an extraordinarily handsome cravat. In any event, as I was riding to the hunt this particular fox disappeared over a low wall of an enclosed estate and I therefore reined my horse and followed on foot. To my amazement the grounds, although quite extensive, were heavily populated with people all dressed in white fencing jackets, and all wandering about quite aimlessly. I might mention that their tailor was extremely careless, for it appeared that the sleeves of all these garments had been sewn shut at the cuffs . . . but I digress.

"I stopped several and asked them if they had seen a small brown fox with beady eyes, and a general air of fright, but they all merely shook their heads

vaguely and continued their wandering about. Not being accustomed to this cavalier treatment, I was about to remonstrate with one of them when there came the distant toll of a bell, and they all turned their footsteps in the direction of a huge house which I then noticed for the first time.

"Determined not to leave without information of my fox, I followed. At the head of the lawn was a set of steps leading to a portal marked 'The Sanitarium,' but as I approached I found my way barred by a large burly individual who placed his hand roughly on my arm and began to interrogate me thoroughly.

"'You!' he said. 'Why aren't you in your jacket?'

"'Unhand me!' I commanded. 'I am the King of Belgravia!'

"'Of course!' this person agreed, still gripping me tightly. 'Who said no! But how did you get out without your white jacket?'

"Well, Mr. Homes, of course it would be quite gauche to wear a white jacket for fox-hunting, and for a moment I was inclined to so advise this uncouth person, but his crudeness led me to feel unobliged to explain. I therefore removed his hand from my sleeve by striking him unconscious, and as I turned away to seek my fox once again, a small person with spiky white hair, a broken nose,

and a curious scar running from ear to ear, and also dressed in the same white jacket with sewn-up sleeves, came up and spoke to me . . . ." He paused, eyeing Homes curiously. "You spoke?"

"No, no!" Homes cried. He was now leaning forward most intently, his eyes gleaming. "Pray continue!"

"In any event, then, this man with the spiky white hair said, 'Pick Windsor; or Napoleon! I am the King of Belgravia!'

"Well, Mr. Homes, naturally I was startled, but before I could clarify the situation, my fox darted out of some bushes where it had been hiding, and streaked down the driveway. I followed at once, but unfortunately the estate on that side borders the Great West Road and I lost the animal—a bit unsportingly, I still think—to a small lad on a bicycle. As I returned to my horse it occurred to me that there was something unusual in my adventure, and I thought at once of seeking your advice."

Homes's eyes shone with excitement. He placed his drink to one side with a shudder and leaned back in his chair, tenting his fingers in concentration. For several moments he maintained silence, but when he finally spoke it was on a subject so far removed from the matter on hand that even I, used as I am to the peregrinations of his brain, was surprised.

"Mr. Kitzle, who handles the hiring of your kitchen staff?"

The King of Belgravia lifted his eyebrows at this unexpected query. "My Prime Minister, Baron Meiterlunk."

"Ah!" said Homes, nodding in satisfaction. He eyed our royal guest keenly. "And would I be wrong in suggesting that of late you and your Prime Minister have not been seeing eye-to-eye on many questions, and that the Baron at this precise moment is in London?"

The King's jaw fell open, disclosing diamond-studded teeth. "Why, yes!" he exclaimed in utter amazement; "although how you were able to deduce this I cannot imagine, as these are facts known only to myself!"

Homes smiled faintly but refused to explain, remaining instead in a brown study that lasted several more minutes. At long last he rose heavily to his feet.

"I fear the affair is more complicated than it appears on the surface," he said thoughtfully. "However, your Majesty may be assured that I shall come to grips with the problem at once. If your Highness would be so kind as to give Dr. Watney the exact location of this estate . . . ."

"Of course. And thank you very much, Mr. Homes." His Majesty arose and bowed gratefully. "I shall await your reports with great eagerness."

Once our distinguished guest had taken his leave, Homes flung himself back into his chair and reached for his glass with a dubious look at the contents.

"A dirty business I fear, Watney," he said, finally returning his eyes to mine. "The outlines of this plot against his Majesty are fairly easy to perceive, but the exact details remain obscure. And also, the best means of foiling the plot."

"But, Homes!" I cried. "What plot? I heard nothing here to-day that would indicate any plot against his Majesty!"

"You heard, but you did not interpret," Homes replied obliquely. "However, it appears too late to take steps to-day. You have our old fencing jackets? Then if you would be so kind as to bother Mrs. Essex for her sewing basket, we had best prepare for the morrow!"

He turned back to his retort and frowned thoughtfully. "And Watney, if you will, you might hand me a bit of charred-oak while you are up. I have just noticed that it wasn't a piece of litmus paper I used this afternoon, after all; but rather a thrupenny-ha'penny return slip for passage on the Hammersmith omnibus!"

The following morning Homes had me up at seven, and after a hurried breakfast of curried kippers, led me swiftly down the

steps to a trap he had engaged earlier. The chill of the morning was acute, and since the fog that was so normal over Whitehall had not yet burned away, our quilted fencing jackets proved a welcome protection against the sharpness of the morning.

Homes gave our destination to the driver, and then leaned back frowning.

The questions that had boiled within me since the previous evening now erupted, but they fell upon deaf ears. "A dastardly affair, Watney," was my companion's only comment, after which he lapsed into a silence which did not invite interruption. I therefore leaned back and reviewed in detail our conversation of the previous day, but I could find nothing there to justify the profound look of introspection that Homes was wearing.

We drew up behind the estate at approximately the same place his Majesty had tethered his mount. Requesting the driver to wait, Homes led the way over the low stone wall and into the cover of a clump of bushes that margined the area. At that hour there were but few jackedeted figures in sight, but our luck was in, for one of them was a short man with spiky white hair, a broken nose, and a scar that traversed his face.

This short man was idling his time away by pointing his sewn

coat sleeve in various directions and saying 'Bang!' At the sight of this strange figure Homes was seized by uncontrollable excitement and drew me deeper into the obscurity of the bushes.

"Watney!" he whispered in agitation. "I feared there was something familiar in the description his Majesty gave yesterday of his impersonator! That 'Bang!' has revived my memory! This man is none other than Colonel Moron, the finest shot in all Europe, and the second most dangerous man in London!"

"But, Homes," I objected, "did you not tell me that Colonel Moron . . . ?"

"Exactly! I had thought him safely incarcerated, but it appears that he is free once again! This development must be given considerable thought."

He leaned against a bush in fierce concentration, his strong thin fingers biting hard on my arm, and once again I was thankful for the protection of the fencing jacket. When at last he straightened up there was a light in his eye that boded ill for some evil-doer.

"Of course!" he said, almost to himself. "Colonel Moron must wait. At the moment it is more important that we see the inside of the house."

We waited until the small man had wandered beyond earshot, and then emerged from the bushes

and walked quickly across the grass towards the large house that dominated the estate. There seemed to be no one in attendance at the entrance, and without a word Homes swung open the door and stepped within.

I followed closely and we found ourselves in a deserted passage-way, from one end of which came the clatter of pots and pans. Motioning me to maintain silence, Homes led the way down the passage and we peered in at the doorway.

It was a huge kitchen with eight or nine cooks busily preparing food. Homes chuckled in pleased satisfaction. "I was sure of it, Watney! It is the final proof!"

At that moment a large man wearing a chef's cap firmly set on his head turned and noted our presence for the first time.

"You!" he cried fiercely. "Why are you snooping in this kitchen like some Schlock Homes?"

Both the smile on my friend's face and his lazy drawl indicated to me that he had indeed found the solution to the problem, and no longer felt the need for subterfuge. "Because," he replied coolly, "I am Schlock Homes!"

"Sure you are!" returned the other. "And I am Pierre of the Ritz!" But when we put forward our hands to accept this introduction, the large man turned away abruptly and called over his shoulder, "Come, come, now! It's

still two hours until lunch!"

"You must forgive him, Watney," Homes explained as we crossed the grounds. "All great chefs are temperamental, and I have heard of this Pierre. However, it is of small importance. I see the entire scheme now, as well as the means of foiling it!"

"But, Homes . . ." I began.

"Explanation must wait, Watney. We must return to Bagel Street as quickly as possible, for I must send a message to my brother Criscroft asking him to intercede with the authorities!"

He hurried me across the wall, and moments later we were clattering over the cobblestones of the Great West Road and heading back to the city.

Once in the cab I could contain myself no longer. "Really, Homes!" I cried in exasperation. "You speak of plots and solutions, but I do not understand any of this! Why all this secrecy? Do you not trust me?"

Homes laughed and laid his arm about my shoulder. When he chose to exert his great charm it was difficult to remain angry with him. "No, no, Watney," he said, chuckling. "The truth is that only at 'The Sanitarium' did I see the plan with all its ramifications, plus the ideal means of thwarting it. Tell me: what is your opinion of the establishment we have just left?"

"Well," I said, mollified by this request for my help, "it is obviously the home of a very wealthy man, for the grounds are extensive and well cared for:

"Relatives?" I hazarded.

"But if they were relatives, how do you account for their clothing?"

"Hand-me-downs?" I suggested.

"No, Watney," he replied, serious once again. "There is only one explanation for the uniformity of the white jackets and for the huge kitchen we saw."

"And that is . . .?"

"The place is obviously a restaurant! As you should know, it is the modern custom to name roadhouses in such a manner as to attract customers, and the name, 'The Sanitarium,' which is from the Latin, suggests cleanliness, the prime concern of people eating out. In line with this custom, it is also common to dress the waiters in keeping with the décor—hence the white jackets."

"But the sewn cuffs, Homes!" I cried. "How do you explain those?"

"Quite simple, Watney! A further extension of the sanitary theme. Obviously to keep their fingers out of the soup!"

I leaned back, amazed at the way Homes could bring clarity out of confusion. Once it had been explained, of course, it ap-

peared simple; but I realized the gifts with which my friend was endowed—to be able to cut so cleanly through the fog of misleading facts. Then another thought struck me.

"But, Homes," I said. "You spoke of a plot..."

"Precisely, Watney! As soon as his Majesty described the white jackets I thought of a restaurant. The story of someone impersonating him suggested the possibility of a plot. It was for this reason that I enquired if Baron Meiterlunk handled the hiring of servants, and if he were in London. Seeing Colonel Moron confirmed my suspicions; it was apparent that Meiterlunk planned on smuggling an assassin into the palace in the guise of a waiter!"

I nodded at the certainty of Home's theory, but then my face fell. "But how can you stop the plot, Homes?" I asked in discouragement.

Homes leaned forward. "It is apparent that Colonel Moron, in the short time since his escape, cannot have completed his training as a waiter," he said calmly. "Meiterlunk is too much of a realist to attempt to place a person, disguised as a servant, on the palace staff unless he were thoroughly trained in his duties. If we are able to prevent Colonel Moron from completing his training, the plot must fall through!"

"But might not Meiterlunk find another instrument, then, for his scheme? A buxom upstairs maid, for example?"

Homes shook his head decisively. "You underestimate the Baron, my dear Watney! Once he finds himself foiled, he will make it his business to discover who was responsible. And once he knows it was Schlock Homes who put an end to his diabolical scheme, he will realize the utter hopelessness of his position, and never try again. No, you may be sure that the King of Belgravia is safe. Baron Meiterlunk will return to his homeland without his assassin, and be content to be Prime Minister and nothing more!"

Our cab rolled up to our door and I managed to pay the driver despite the sewn sleeves and follow Homes up the stairs. Once within the privacy of our chambers, Homes flung off the restricting jacket and reached for the Iranian *wagon-lit* in which he kept his tobacco.

"And now, Watney," he said, once his pipe was going to his satisfaction, "the wire to Criscroft that shall scotch his nefarious plot once and for all!"

As he dictated to me, my mind reared at the sheer brilliance of his scheme. It was now certain that Colonel Moron would never conclude his training as a waiter—for Homes was arranging

to have 'The Sanitarium' deprived at once of its food-dispensing license!

It was several days before the fruits of Homes's efforts on behalf of the King of Belgravia became apparent. I had come in to a late breakfast of kippered curry to find Homes deep in his newspaper, *The Morning Vesper*; with a smile of triumph he handed it across to me, the article he had been perusing uppermost.

It detailed an account of the return to Belgravia of its Prime Minister, and noted that he returned alone. The King was remaining for a few days to enjoy the poule-shooting at Sandringham.

Having already praised Homes for his coup several times, I felt it best to give his ego a rest,

and for that reason pretended interest in another article; but his keen eyes immediately noted my defection.

"You have noted something of interest to us?" he asked, alert at once.

I could not keep up the pretence. "No, Homes," I replied, a bit ashamed of my subterfuge. "Actually, it is nothing but a tragic story of a food riot in some insane asylum."

"Poor souls!" said Homes softly, displaying that humanity that never ceased to surprise me. "I wish I could help!" He looked up, laying aside his pipe.

"Do you know, Watney," he added, his deep eyes serious, "whenever I read of places of that nature I cannot help but think: 'There, but for the grace of God, goes Schlock Homes!'"



## Harry Kemelman

### A Winter's Tale

In 1967, a vintage year for the publication of books of mystery short stories, we nominated no less than three collections of shorts for QUEEN'S QUORUM: *A History of the Detective-Crime Short Story as Revealed by the 125 Most Important Books Published in this Field since 1845 (reissued, with two Supplements, by Biblo and Tannen, 1969).*

Queen's Quorum Number 125, the anchor book of 1967, was THE NINE MILE WALK by Harry Kemelman, author of the best-selling detective novels, FRIDAY THE RABBI SLEPT LATE, SATURDAY THE RABBI WENT HUNGRY, and SUNDAY THE RABBI STAYED HOME. QQ Number 125 gathered together the deductive adventures of Nicky Welt, Snowden Professor of English Language and Literature—a contemporary armchair detective in the great tradition of C. Auguste Dupin, Prince Zaleski, and the Old Man in the Corner. All the Nicky Welt stories first appeared in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine," and we are happy to include one in this anthology...

#### Detective: NICHOLAS WELT

FRIDAY NIGHTS I DINE AT THE Faculty Club as the guest of my friend Nicholas Welt, Snowden Professor of English Literature. When I left the Law Faculty to campaign—successfully—for the office of County Attorney, I managed to retain my membership in the Faculty Club, and I lunch and dine there several times a week, often with Nicky. But on Friday nights I

am there as his guest, presumably to balance the Wednesday nights that he invariably comes to my house for an evening of chess.

When Ellis Stone, County Attorney for Suffolk, dropped in on me late one Friday afternoon in January on a matter of business, I invited him to join us for dinner. Frankly, I was not certain how Nicky would take my presumption in burdening him with another

guest—Nicky can be quite sensitive about such things—but it went off very well. He remembered having met Stone at my house and was pleased to see him again.

Ellis Stone is about my age and Nicky is only a year or two older, but his snow-white hair—my own is just beginning to gray at the temples—and his lined, gnome-like face make him seem many years my senior, and he tends to act the part. He shepherded us into the dining room like an indulgent uncle taking a couple of favorite nephews out of school for a treat. He sat between us and urged the richest dishes on us when the waiter came to take our orders.

We talked about the weather, of course. Our winter that year was setting meteorological records. We had had three major snowstorms during the month of December, unrelieved by any perceptible thaw. The pattern had continued into January with a ten-inch snowstorm on New Year's Day, a blizzard three days later that had left sixteen inches of snow, and a cold spell which had kept the thermometer around zero for a fortnight. And when at the end of that period the temperature did go up somewhat, it was only to deposit more snow.

Stone said, "Driving through the streets of the city is like running a bobsled course. The

snowbanks on either side of you are so high, you can't see the people on the sidewalks. Why, yesterday we found a man buried in the snowbank. It was on Holgate Street. That's not a main traffic artery to be sure, but it's a fairly well traveled street. He had been there since the big blizzard on the fourth—that's three weeks ago. Imagine the hundreds of people who walked past him in that time and no one the wiser."

"I heard the item on the news broadcast last night," I said. "There is a suspicion of murder, isn't there?"

"No suspicion," said Stone grimly. "It's definitely murder. His head was bashed in and he had been laid out with his hands by his sides as neatly as you please. It's hardly the way a man would fall into a snowbank accidentally."

"It sounds as though it might be interesting," I said.

Stone shrugged. "Just another bread-and-butter case."

"And what is a bread-and-butter case?" asked Nicky.

Stone laughed shortly. "My brother-in-law has a hardware store," he said irrelevantly, "and any time you go in there you are apt to see a woman buying a frying pan or a man buying a garden hose. Now, even if they are regular customers of his, he still may not see them again for

a couple of months. So he regards those sales as jam. In a sense, they're almost accidental. But the carpenters, plumbers, and electricians who trade with him—they're his bread-and-butter customers. He can count on seeing them several times a week right through the year. Now in the city we have a sizable population of professional criminals. We can depend on them to give us work week in and week out. So they're our bread-and-butter cases."

"And is your procedure any different in bread-and-butter cases?" asked Nicky.

"Well, we usually know who is responsible for a particular job almost as soon as it's done—by the way it's done or by way of rumor through the grapevine, but mostly because we make it a point to know these people. We know how they think and how they feel and how they operate. We know what pressures are at work and what balance of forces obtain at any particular time. By the same token, these people being professional are adept at covering their tracks. So we are usually in the position of knowing who committed a particular crime, but we have no proof."

"Your kind of reasoning and analysis would be useless in these cases, Professor Welt. You'd have no clues to start with. Frankly, there's nothing subtle about our methods in bread-and-butter

cases. We don't knock the suspects around, although quite a bit of that was done under my predecessor some years back. We just question those involved—at length."

"You see, we're looking for a chink in their armor, so we can get a wedge into it and open them up. We may have to put pressure on one person in order to get him to put pressure on *another* who, let's say, may have given a suspect an alibi. Once the alibi is broken, we have our case. Take this present business, for example. When the police lieutenant notified me that John Reilly had got his lumps, I suggested immediately that he pick up Tommy Jordan for questioning, and he grinned at me and told me they already had."

"Strictly speaking, John Reilly was not of the underworld—at least, we were never able to pin anything on him. He was on the fringe, you might say. He owned some slum tenement houses and a bunch of sleazy boarding houses, and he did some bail-bonding and some money lending. A bachelor, about fifty, he was a little jockey of a man, always dressed to the nines, with an exaggerated sense of personal dignity. If you called him John or Reilly, he'd correct you. 'It's *Mister*,' he would say. So he was known around as *Mister John*.

"He had a little box of an office

in the Lawyers' Building right in Courthouse Square. He was never there, but you could leave a message for him with his clerk, Charlie Gerber, and it would reach Mister John. The office was where the people who owed him money left it, and where the janitors of his properties left the rents they collected. As I said, we make it our business to know about these people, and we know that Terry Jordan had it in for Mister John.

"Terry Jordan is a big broth of a lad, good-hearted, but not overly endowed with brains. He came up from juvenile delinquency to small-time crime, but was never very successful at it. He is what is known in his circle as a born patsy—you know, always the last one over the fence. He finally got a job as assistant manager, which is polite for bouncer, at the Hi-Hat Café. There was a waitress there, a big blonde amazon of a girl, called Lily Cherry. He's a good-looking boy, so it's not surprising that after a while she became his girl friend."

"You mean, they became engaged?" asked Nicky.

Stone smiled at him affectionately. "No, Professor, they didn't become engaged, and neither did they get married when he moved into her apartment. It was just a convenient arrangement and they both continued to work

at the Hi-Hat. Then Terry got restless again. We picked him up on a burglary charge and he got a year in the pen. There was no question about his guilt, you understand, and it was only his own stupidity that enabled us to pin it on him; but somehow, perhaps from something one of the detectives had said, Terry got it into his head that Mister John had something to do with his arrest. There was nothing to it—just an overzealous detective hoping to get a lead. It happens all the time. It's hard to imagine even a light-brain like Terry Jordan having taken it seriously."

"Unless he wanted to believe it," Nicky suggested.

Stone favored him with a quick appreciative glance. "You mean so he could tell himself that it wasn't his fault that he got caught? You've got a point there, Professor. Anyway, there it was. Whether justified or not, Terry thought Mister John had fingered him, and it was known that he thought so. Now, for a supposedly smart man, Mister John then did a foolish thing. Although he knew how Terry felt, nevertheless he began to play up to Lily and in a little while he took Terry's place in the apartment. From the girl's point of view it was a much better deal: it enabled her to stop working; she got a lot of new pretties; and she even had Mister John's convertible."

"Now Terry didn't expect her to sit home and twiddle her thumbs waiting for him to get out of jail. He wasn't married to her and there was probably nothing really intense between them. But this combination of the two things—his hate of Mister John and now John's taking over his girl—"

"King David and Bathsheba," Nicky murmured.

"That's it exactly," said Stone. "And it was also a matter of prestige. Everybody knew he blamed Mister John for his arrest. So this was adding insult to injury. He had to avenge his honor, as it were, or he would be the laughing-stock of his circle. At that, I didn't expect murder, although I would not have been surprised if he had knocked John about a bit. Maybe that's all he planned to do, but just struck a little harder than he intended."

"Terry got out on the second of January. He went to see Lily. We know that. Then he began making inquiries about Mister John. He even went to John's office and asked Gerber where he could find him. I told you he was not very bright."

Stone leaned forward and ticked off the points on his fingers. "What do we have? We know that Terry had a grudge against Mister John—motive. He gets out of prison on the second and he starts looking for him—oppor-

tunity. Weapon?—any blunt instrument, a wrench, even a heavy stick, will do. Now method: the fourth, that's just two days later, we have a blizzard; he locates Mister John, steals a car—he's rather gifted that way, but as a matter of fact, in this weather we've been having; lots of folks don't turn their motors off when they stop for awhile—he steals a car and catches up with Mister John. Maybe he hits him over the head with something to persuade John to get into the car, but he hits a little too hard and the man is dead. It's around four o'clock and we're having a blizzard. There were very few cars on the road, perhaps none, and no pedestrians. Besides, in that driving snow visibility was only a few feet.

"Terry drives along looking for a place to dispose of the body. There's about six inches of newly fallen snow at the time and both sides of the streets are lined with snowbanks maybe four feet high from the previous storms. He finds a likely spot and pulls over to the side of the road. No one is coming toward him and in his rear-view mirror he sees no one coming behind him.

"He opens the door of the car, picks up the body, and pushes it into the snowbank. He puts more snow on top of it. He knows there'll be another six to ten inches before the storm subsides

and then the plows will come along. So he's perfectly safe, and in a few minutes he's back in the car and drives off—"

"What makes you so sure of the time and date?" I asked.

Stone grinned. "We're sure, all-right. It wasn't too hard. We cut cores out of the snowbank around the body and then analyzed it the way a geologist would. You see, we knew just when it snowed and how much. The Street Department has records of when they plowed and when they sanded. The combination of the two gave us a pretty accurate record."

"And what did Terry say?" I asked.

"Oh, he denied everything, of course."

"Did you tell him you knew he had been looking for Mister John?"

"He insisted he never got to see him. He maintained that when he went to see Lily, she told him that she and Mister John were going to get married. They were going to drive down to Florida and get hitched on the way. And he insisted that he was looking for Mister John merely to tell him that he bore him no grudge and to wish him luck."

"Quite possible," Nicky murmured.

Stone gave him a wry smile. "You joking, Professor? Why would Mister John want to marry Lily?—especially after he had

been living with her for a year. I'll admit she might have thought so. She's not very bright either. In any case, she backed up Terry's story."

"Did she report him missing?" I asked.

Stone shook his head. "No one reported him missing."

"Isn't that in itself suspicious?" I asked. "He was her fiancé and was missing for three weeks—"

"At first sight it would appear so," said Stone, "but in all fairness it doesn't mean too much. Those people wouldn't be likely to go to the police. For all she knew, his absence might merely mean that he had some deal going out of town. Actually, there is no one who would be likely to report his absence. The man was a bachelor. Except for a widowed sister-in-law and her son, he has no family at all."

"And who else would miss him? His clerk? Gerber said he sometimes didn't see Mister John for a couple of weeks at a time; even when he was right around Courthouse Square every day. He knew nothing about the business because that's the way Mister John wanted it. If someone came in to pay money, Gerber took it and gave a receipt. If someone wanted to get in touch with Mister John, he left him a note. Gerber got paid by the month, so he wouldn't even start thinking about it for another week."

"Of course, after a while—say a couple of months—his friends or Lily or the clerk might begin inquiring around to see what they could learn by the grapevine. Then, if they heard nothing, they might risk going to the police. But that would be only after months of absence.

"That leaves his sister-in-law and her son, Frank Reilly. They're respectable people who had as little to do with John as possible. She is a retired schoolteacher. Frank, her son, is about thirty and unmarried and lives with her. He runs a stationery shop not far from where they live in the suburbs. Normally, they wouldn't hear from Mister John for months at a time. The last time they saw him was early in November. It seems Frank had a chance to buy the store he was working in. His boss had to go to Arizona for his health and there was a chance to get it at a bargain price. So Frank went to see his uncle—much against his mother's will, I gather—and Mister John gave him six thousand dollars.

"In going over Mister John's books yesterday that checked out. For obvious reasons, Mister John didn't go in much for keeping records—he didn't even keep his old bank statements: Most of his business, I imagine, was done in cash, but he did pay some things by check and there was a check book in his desk. The stubs show-

ed that three checks for two thousand dollars each had been made out to Reilly on November seventh."

"Three checks?"

"According to Frank, that was so that he could dicker. He was to offer two thousand first and then four thousand if that didn't work, and finally the six if it was absolutely necessary. I gather that Frank, who is a kind of arty young man—a little on the swish side, to tell the truth—thought it undignified to haggle and didn't try to. Obviously, he is not one of the great financial brains of our time, but he seems like a decent sort and he's devoted to his mother who is crippled with arthritis and hobbles about on a cane. The big advantage of the store from his point of view was that it was located not far from his mother's house and he could run over whenever she needed him."

We had finished our dinner and at Nicky's suggestion we adjourned to the Commons Room for coffee. The waiter moved a coffee table in front of the fireplace and set armchairs around it. When he had served us and we were once more alone, I said flatly, "I don't see that you have much of a case."

"We don't," Stone admitted, "not yet. But we have the man."

"But you can't keep him," I insisted.

"We can hold him for questioning—and we'll question him, all right. We'll take him over every minute of his life since he got out of jail. We'll question him over and over. And if he contradicts himself just once, we'll have our wedge."

"You could probably get me to confess under the same treatment," I said.

Stone flushed. He was on the point of replying in anger, but managed to control himself. "We fight fire with fire," he said stiffly. "We know he killed him—"

"I can see why you think he killed him," Nicky interrupted, "but I can't understand why he buried him."

Stone turned to Nicky very pointedly, as if to ignore me. "Naturally he wouldn't want the body found. He did it for the same reason that a murderer buries his victim in the woods or ties a weight around the body and dumps it over a bridge."

Nicky shook his head. "Surely, Mr. Stone, you see the difference between burying a man in a snowbank on a busy street and burying him in the woods or dumping him into the ocean?"

"What's the difference?" Stone demanded.

Nicky ventured a wry smile. "In the latter case, the action is accompanied by the hope, not unjustified, that the body will *never* be found at all—or if it is, then

*found in an unrecognizable condition.* But in burying a man in a snowbank on one of the streets of a city, there is the certainty that he *will be found and readily recognized when found.* He will have been preserved in deep freeze, as it were. On the basis of our normal weather the discovery would be delayed only a few days at the most. Even with the extraordinary winter we have been having, the murderer could only hope for a delay of a few weeks or so."

"Well, it would give him that much more time for a getaway," said Stone.

Nicky shook his head decisively. "But Terry didn't try to get away, did he? Your police had no difficulty in picking him up, did they? What I want to know is: why didn't the murderer just open the door of the car, push the body of his victim out, and then ride on? The body would have fallen at the foot of the snowbank and even if discovered almost immediately, there would be a good chance that it would be assumed he was the victim of a hit-and-run driver. If the body were wholly or partly covered by the falling snow, there would then be a good chance the body *would* be hit by a passing motorist, or even by the snowplow. In either case, the resultant contusions would probably serve to conceal the blow

on the head, and the murder could easily have passed as an accident."

"He might have panicked," Stone suggested.

"Then he would have been even more likely to have dumped the body without thinking and run," Nicky retorted. "No, I'm afraid you don't understand the full implication of my question. What was the effect of burying the body in the snowbank? *To delay its discovery at least a few days.* Since it is such an unusual action, it is fair to assume that *this is precisely what the murderer wanted.*"

"What could he hope to gain by such a delay?" Stone demanded.

Nicky pursed his lips as though he had bit into a sour lemon. "I'm sure there are any number of possibilities, but one suggests itself to me immediately. If he had a post-dated check of Mister John's, he might hope to cash it."

Stone raised an appreciative eyebrow. "You mean if John had been known to be dead, the bank would automatically stop payment on any check dated after the date of his death. It's an interesting possibility, Professor. It could be that Terry didn't intend to kill Mister John or even to beat him up, only to shake him down for a large sum of money. That might explain why he wasn't afraid to

make open inquiry for him.

"All right then: he braces Mister John for a stake. But he's not taking fifty or a hundred dollars. He demands a thousand or two. 'I don't carry that kind of money around,' says Mister John. 'I'll tell you what, I'll give you a check.' So he writes out a check but he dates it ahead a few days 'accidentally on purpose,' planning to stop payment on it. That's the sort of thing I can imagine Mister John doing.

"But it doesn't work.. Terry spots the future date and in his anger he wallops John over the head. But he hits too hard, so now he has a body on his hands. If he can keep the death secret for a few days—"

Quite suddenly the eagerness went out of Stone's voice. "It won't do, Professor. Terry would realize that to cash the check would tie him to the murder. He may be dumb, but he's not that dumb."

An idle thought had been pecking at my mind and now the pieces were all falling into position. "Look here, Nicky, I think I see what you're driving at. You're taking this business of Mister John's wanting to marry Lily at face value."

Nicky's nod of encouragement urged me on. "Here's a big amazon of a woman, and Mister John is a little shrimp of a man. Her handsome lover comes out

of jail and is now available. Naturally, she prefers him to Mister John. Well, she's big enough to handle Mister John. She doesn't have to go looking for him—he's at her apartment. She has a car—his. They were planning to go to Florida and get married. Naturally, she'd need clothes and she'd put it up to Mister John. So he would sit down and write her a nice big check."

Nicky smiled. "And why would he give her a post-dated check?"

Several reasons suggested themselves to me, but before I could offer them, Stone growled, "Theories—just a bunch of fine theories that don't mean anything. Now I can settle this post-dated check business right now. We went through Mister John's books with a fine-tooth comb. There wasn't much to go through, so we couldn't have overlooked anything. There were no checks missing from his check book. Every check that had been issued had a stub made out."

"Have you received this month's statement of his account from the bank?" Nicky asked.

"We asked them for it, and they promised to prepare it right away. I guess it's on my desk."

"Then I am prepared to make a wager," said Nicky. He drew an old-fashioned coin purse from his trouser pocket. Unsnapping the catch, he poked around in its depths with a lean forefinger.

Then with a faint sigh he drew out a quarter and placed it primly on the coffee table.

Stone smiled. He tossed a quarter onto the table so that it landed next to Nicky's coin. "All right, you're faded. What's your bet?"

"I am prepared to wager that in the bank statement you think is now resting on your desk, you will find a check for two thousand dollars made out to Frank Reilly."

"Frank Reilly, the nephew? You mean that he did manage to get the business for four thousand dollars and kept the rest for himself?"

"I mean that the story of three checks being made out so that he could dicker with the original owner of the store is all poppycock."

"What's wrong with it?" asked Stone.

"It's not the way you dicker. The spread is too great. If the asking price is six thousand dollars, you might start with four and then compromise on five or five thousand five hundred. But you wouldn't arrange to go from two to four to six in big jumps. Frank, not being much of a businessman, might not realize it, but Mister John certainly would. Besides, I don't think Mister John would just hand over six thousand dollars to the likes of Frank and tell him to go ahead and buy a business."

"What's the matter with Frank?" asked Stone.

"He's thirty and unmarried and has no trade or profession. And since his mother was a schoolteacher it was probably not for lack of opportunity or because of parental opposition. He is probably what we used to call 'a mama's boy.' I'd say he's had a succession of small jobs ending up with that of clerk in a neighborhood stationery shop. My guess is that Mister John would have looked over the business very carefully, say that it was a good buy, and then arranged for Frank to make payment in three equal monthly payments. So he made out the three checks and dated two of them ahead."

"But the stubs all show the same date," Stone objected.

"The stubs, yes; because he probably made them out first and all at once. But then in making out the checks, he would naturally date them as he wanted them paid—one for November, one for December, and the third for January. Now that last check was dated January 7, and it was very important that the bank should have no reason to suspect that Mister John was anything but alive on that day."

"Are you trying to say that his nephew killed him?"

"I am saying that Frank buried him in the snowbank. I don't think he'd have the nerve to kill

him. I suspect that it was his mother, that dear old schoolteacher, who killed him, probably with that same stick that she hobbles around on."

"But why?" asked Stone.

"Because he was going to get married, of course." Nicky paused. "Don't you see? He came out to them—Mister John probably did visit them only a couple of times a year, as they said. But I'd bet it was not because *they* discouraged him.

"What was there in that household that would attract a man like Mister John? The only reason he visited them at all, and that as little as possible, was because they were his only living relatives. Undoubtedly, duty calls.

"But I'm sure Frank saw him more often. Living on a schoolteacher's pension and a clerk's wages, they must have needed help every now and then—fifty or a hundred dollars that Mister John would give Frank in cash. It stands to reason that Frank would not have approached him for six thousand if he had not received smaller sums in the past.

"Now the old lady might have thought that the sun rises and sets on her darling boy, but she was under no illusion about his capacity to make a living. What would happen to him after she died and her pension would stop? Well, there was always Uncle

John to help the boy out. But now, at the age of fifty, John was planning to marry! That meant that even while he lived, the money would not be forthcoming so readily. And in the event of his death, instead of the money going to Frank, it would go to John's widow.

"So she struck with her cane. And then she had her son carry the body to the car in the garage. That precious pair, with the body of Mister John making a grisly third, probably drove out with the intention of dropping it on the side of the road—until they thought of the final payment that had to be made on the store."

Stone stared at Nicky, speechless for the moment. Then he jumped up. "There's bound to be somebody still in the office. I'm going to phone and check that bank statement."

While Stone was gone, Nicky and I waited in silence. There were questions that I wanted to ask, but somehow it did not seem fair while Stone was gone. Nicky seemed perfectly at ease, but I noticed that his fingers were drumming on the arm of his chair.

In a few minutes Stone returned. "Pick up the marbles, Professor," he said. "The check was there all right, just as you deduced."

I could not resist a sly dig. "Then you mean, Nicky," I asked innocently, "that Terry had

nothing to do with the murder?"

Nicky turned sharply. "He had everything to do with it!"

"What did he do?" Stone and I asked, almost in unison.

"He got out of jail, that's what he did. That triggered off the whole affair. I imagine that Mister John was very much in love with the girl—he must have been to take the risk he did. I think they were happy together. I think that between the two, Terry and Mister John, Lily would probably have chosen the older man. But Mister John could not be sure of that. All he could think of was that this handsome young man was back on the scene and that Lily might go back to him. So he asked her to marry him as a means of tying her to him. And when she told Terry, he probably realized that it was a fine opportunity for her. Being intrinsically a decent young man, he wished her luck and assured her that he had no hard feelings. And then he tried to see Mister John to assure him that he had nothing to fear from him."

"Like the hero in a soap opera," Stone remarked.

"Precisely," said Nicky. "People like Terry get their ideas of morality and ethics, as do the rest of us, from the books they read and the plays they hear and see." He could not forbear to add with a frosty little smile, "You have to realize that, Mr. Stone, in order to understand them."

# Patrick Quentin

## Another Man's Poison

One day we were "talking shop" with Q. Patrick-Patrick Quentin discussing classic detective-story themes—the locked room (the oldest 'tec thesis of them all, though few of us think of the "hermetically sealed chamber" as the first and therefore the oldest theme); multiple murder, especially the series of seemingly unconnected and unrelated homicides; the impossible crime; the marooned-on-an-island or isolated-house-in-a-storm; and so on. And then Q.P.-P.Q. remarked that sooner or later, after E.Q.'s THE DUTCH SHOE MYSTERY, every mystery writer takes a whack at murder-in-a-hospital. Q.P.-P.Q. believes that the appeal of killing someone in a hospital is fictionally irresistible—the contrast between life-saving and life-taking is too dramatic to resist; also, the hospital locale offers an irresistible heroine—the beautiful nurse pursued down midnight corridors or trapped in a surgical amphitheater... Here is the Patrick Quentin version in a short novel, with the stamp of their fine craftsmanship and those fresh touches, those variations of plot-device, which Q.P.-P.Q. always add . . .

TENSION WAS GROWING IN THE large operating theater of the College Hospital. Rona Heath sensed it as a definite, almost palpable presence. It was in the expectant immobility of the medical students waiting in the raised gallery above her; it was in the curiously strained stance of Dr. Oliver Lord, the young intern, as he stood, shrouded in mask and gown, by the instrument table.

And it was in Rona, too—a tension and a vague feeling that something was wrong.

Everything in the theater was ready, and Dr. Knudsen should be here. It was quite a long time since she had heard the chief surgeon go into his private office beyond the scrubroom, where it was his habit to snatch his frugal lunch before the afternoon work. But now the theater clock showed twenty minutes past two, and he

had not even come out to start sterilizing his hands.

Never before, during many months of service as his chosen operating-room nurse, had Rona known Dr. Knudsen late for a case.

Voice and a faint moan sounded from the anesthetizing room to the left of the scrubroom. A grayish, unobtrusive man appeared in the doorway.

"We've just brought the patient up, Dr. Lord." Gregory Venner, Dr. Knudsen's anesthetist of twenty years' standing, looked worried. "He's having considerable pain. Oughtn't I to start putting him under right away?"

"Better wait. There's not a peep out of the Chief yet. Can't imagine what's keeping him." Oliver Lord's blue eyes, turning to Rona, showed unmistakable anxiety. "Go get him, Rona. Say it's rush or—rupture."

Obediently Rona hurried toward the scrubroom door. She had been worried about the Chief all day. Throughout the morning operating session, he had been as impersonal and efficient as usual. But, from the tiny creases around his eyes and his almost hostile taciturnity with Venner and Lord, she had judged that something was wrong.

As she crossed the white tiles of the scrubroom floor toward the door of Dr. Knudsen's private office, a woman's voice sounded

from inside the room. That was odd, too. The Chief followed a strict routine, and it was unheard of for him to allow any visitor to interrupt his brief lunch-hour seclusion.

Near the door Rona started at the words she heard: "Of course, it's blackmail, Thiegn . . ."

She recognized that hard, assertive voice. It belonged to Caroline Broderick, the Chief's immensely wealthy sister, who had recently made a second marriage with the director of the hospital and had become its most influential nuisance.

The voice sounded again with almost savage vehemence: "But you wouldn't understand! You, with your cold-blooded ideals, wouldn't realize that I'd far rather be blackmailed than have anything interfere with Linette's happiness!"

Rona had knocked, but there was no reply. Not wishing to eavesdrop, she pushed open the door. But, as she stood on the threshold, no one paid any attention to her. The chief surgeon, lean and ascetic, was sitting behind his desk. Opposite him stood Caroline Broderick, handsome, smart, and almost too youthfully streamlined.

"It's my problem, not yours, Thiegn. You've got to keep out of it."

Dr. Knudsen rose to his feet. "But you have made it my prob-

lem now, Caroline," he said, with slow deliberation. "I have made an agreement, and I shall not go back on my word. You must do as you wish about the grant; you know my point of view regarding it. But I shall most certainly see that this entire matter is exposed at the Board Meeting this afternoon and that all moneys are returned to you."

As Rona moved forward, both he and Mrs. Broderick turned sharply.

"Ah, yes, Miss Heath. The operation." The Chief's voice was clipped. "I will be with you as soon as I have sterilized. Tell them they can start anesthesia immediately."

"But, Thegn . . .!"

"I am sorry, my dear. There is nothing more to say." Dr. Knudsen's shrug was final. "As it is, you have made me late for an important operation. You have also made me miss my lunch."

As Rona hurried out of the room, she caught a last glimpse of the chief surgeon. He had picked up the coffee cup from the tray of lunch in front of him and was lifting it to his lips.

Rona had no time to dwell upon the implications of that remarkable scene. She had just delivered the Chief's instructions to Venner and started to resterilize, when Dr. Knudsen came into the scrubroom and took the basin next to hers. Before

he began the routine process of washing his hands, she noticed that he was nibbling at a lump of sugar. She had seen him do that on several other occasions, and he had explained that sugar was the best source of quick energy, especially in any emergency which caused one to miss a meal.

That afternoon, as he tossed the remains of the lump into the container for soiled linen and plunged his hands into the soapy water, he made no attempt to talk. He was still silent later when Rona helped him into his sterile gown and tied on his mask. Feeling vaguely uneasy, she preceded him into the operating-room.

The patient had been wheeled in. Dr. Oliver Lord, his red head bent over the prostrate form, was preparing the abdominal field. At the end of the table, Gregory Venner was taking a blood-pressure reading.

As always before an important operation, an expectant silence filled the large theater, stretching up to the cluster of students in the gallery. When Dr. Knudsen appeared, all attention focused on his thin, white-gowned figure.

Only his eyes and forehead were visible above the gauze mask. But, with a twinge of anxiety, Rona noticed that the skin of his temples had turned a grayish white.

The Chief had taken his place by the table and was nodding to her. Immediately she handed him a scalpel. For a second Dr. Knudsen stood in silence, carefully scrutinizing the field of operation. Then, with a caution that was almost too meticulous, he made the initial incision, cutting through the outer layer of epidermis.

Dr. Lord hovered by the table, ready with the artery clamp. Rona held out a sterile sponge on long forceps. Her eyes, trained to watch every movement of the surgeon's hands, were intent on the knife, which should now be probing deeper into the wound.

But it was not. It had been withdrawn, and hung uncertainly poised in Dr. Knudsen's fingers. Rona's startled gaze traveled upward to the surgeon's face. He was staring fixedly in front of him with a dull look.

"Dr. Knudsen; you're not well."

She took an instinctive step toward him. But, as she did so, the surgeon lurched backward with a little groan. The scalpel fell from his hand.

Gregory Venner moved swiftly from the end of the table; but before the anesthetist reached him, Dr. Knudsen staggered away, one rubber-gloved hand clenched against his heart.

"Lord—you—carry—on."

For a moment he stood motionless, keeping himself steady with

an obvious effort. Then, suddenly, he fell, his thin, white-robed figure sprawling at the side of the operating table.

Some of the medical students had started to clatter down from the gallery. Rona felt a moment of blind panic. But Oliver Lord's incisive voice steadied her: "Miss Heath—Venner. Don't touch him. You've got to keep sterile—got to go on with the operation immediately."

Two students had run up to Dr. Knudsen and were lifting him. Lord rapped, "Take him into Broderick—anyone." The young intern picked up a fresh scalpel. "Miss Health, another sponge."

Rona obeyed. But, as she did so, she could not keep her eyes from moving to the door of the scrubroom, through which the students were carrying Dr. Knudsen. The chief surgeon's body was sagging and limp.

Rona forced herself to concentrate on her duties as Dr. Oliver Lord continued with the operation. It was an extremely difficult case and one that normally would not have been entrusted to a relatively inexperienced intern. This was going to be an acid test for Oliver Lord.

The long, careful minutes of the operation ticked by. Thirty . . . forty . . . fifty . . . Rona knew enough to realize that Oliver Lord was doing an extremely dramatic and efficient job . . . At

last the final sutures were in place. The intern gestured, and the patient was wheeled away.

Oliver looked exhausted, but his eyes beneath the thick red hair showed a certain grim satisfaction. "Well, I always wanted a cholecystectomy, but I didn't want it wished on me quite as suddenly as all this." As Rona untied his gauze mask and he peeled off his rubber gloves, he grunted, "Hope nothing's badly wrong with the Chief."

The two of them moved toward the scrubroom, but Gregory Venner pushed ahead of them, his face creased with concern. They saw him disappear into the Chief's office, and then come hurrying back.

"He—he isn't there, Dr. Lord!" he faltered. "They've taken him away. It must be serious."

Gregory Venner, Rona knew, centered his entire life around his devotion to the Chief and made the ideal stooge for the aloof, arrogant Knudsen, who gave intimacy to no one and who accepted the anesthetist's unquestioning loyalty as his right. For twenty years the two bachelors had spent their vacations together, mountain-climbing in various parts of the States, and the anesthetist's chief pride lay in the fact that it was Knudsen and not himself who had won a reputation as one of the country's most expert climbers. Venner, himself,

had always modestly avoided the limelight, even on the much publicized occasion five years before when the iron man, Knudsen, had collapsed high up the flank of a remote peak and the little anesthetist had trekked miles to procure the medical aid which had arrived just in time to save the Chief's life.

"What can have happened?"

Venner broke off as the heavy double doors of the theater swung open and Dr. Broderick came in, accompanied by Dr. Hugh Ellsworth, the young head of the Neurological Clinic, where Rona had worked before she had switched to the surgical side. With a quickening of concern she watched the two men move toward them. Hugh Ellsworth looked very grave; Dr. Broderick's handsome, rather florid face wore the expression of someone bringing serious news.

The Director did not speak, however, until a gesture of his hand had banished the few remaining medical students from the spectators' gallery. When the door above had flapped shut for the last time, his portentous gaze moved from Rona to Gregory Venner, resting finally on Oliver Lord.

"I'm afraid I have a very tragic announcement to make," he said. "Dr. Knudsen is dead."

"Dead!" The word came bleakly from Gregory Venner.

"Dr. Knudsen dead! It's—it's not possible."

It did not seem possible to Rona, either. The Chief had taken an almost fanatical pride in his iron constitution.

And now he was dead.

The Director was saying, "He died in his office almost before I reached him. Ellsworth and I had just arrived at the hospital from lunch and were able to go to him almost immediately. But there was nothing we could do."

"But what was it?" Oliver Lord's voice was incredulous.

Dr. Broderick hesitated. Then, giving each word careful emphasis, he said, "It is too early yet to be certain, but both Ellsworth and I are of the opinion that my brother-in-law died from acute poisoning through an overdose of some drug such as atropine, or more probably hyoscine. It must have been ingested very shortly before his collapse."

"Hyoscine! But why the hell should he have been taking hyoscine?" Oliver stared blankly. "He wasn't ill, was he, sir?"

"Not that I know of, Dr. Lord. My brother in law was very—a h—uncommunicative. Especially so on personal matters. As for drugs"—Dr. Broderick shrugged—"you know his reputation. He hardly ever prescribed internal medication and was most unlikely to use it himself."

"In any case, he'd never have

taken an overdose of a dangerous drug like hyoscine by mistake. It's absurd." Oliver's lips had gone very pale. "You're not implying he committed suicide?"

The Director shot him a rather pained glance. "There was no conceivable reason for his wishing to kill himself. Even if there had been, he would not have taken poison while faced with the responsibility of performing a major operation."

"It wasn't an accident! It wasn't suicide!" Gregory Venner's voice trembled. "You don't—you can't be trying to tell us that someone poisoned Knudsen?"

Dr. Broderick replied heavily, "Under the circumstances it seems extremely probable that Dr. Knudsen has been deliberately murdered."

"Murdered!"

Oliver Lord and Venner were watching the Director in stunned silence. Rona felt as if the whole world had suddenly gone mad. A great surgeon murdered in a great life-saving institution. Things like that just did not happen.

And yet Dr. Broderick was discussing it as an established fact. He was saying, "A terrible thing for us all, for my poor wife, and for the hospital. Newspaper publicity . . . questions . . . the police."

The police! Rona could think more clearly now, and her

thoughts turned instantly to her brother on the police force. Jim Heath, as lieutenant in the Homicide Division, was known and respected around the hospital. She said, "Dr. Broderick, Lieutenant Heath of the Homicide Bureau is my brother. If you could get him to investigate this, I know he'd be as considerate as possible."

"A brother on the force, you say?" The Director's smooth face registered interest and relief. "That may prove most fortunate." He whispered a few words to Ellsworth, and then said, "Miss Heath, will you be so kind as to ask your brother to come around?"

Feeling rather dazed, Rona went to the telephone and called Headquarters. Jim's voice over the wire sounded strangely unfamiliar, clipped and official. He would be around at once, he said.

The prospect of the police's imminent arrival seemed to spur the Director into flustered activity. "The—ah—poison was probably administered in Knudsen's office. You, Ellsworth, and you, Miss Heath, I can rely on you to see that the room is locked up immediately." He turned to Oliver Lord. "Dr. Lord, were any other operations scheduled for today?"

"No, sir. Dr. Knudsen had put off all except emergency cases until tomorrow. He told me there was a very important directors'

meeting later this afternoon."

"Ah, yes. The meeting. It will have to be postponed, of course." Dr. Broderick turned to Gregory Venner; "Venner, go and tell my secretary to make the necessary arrangements.... Dr. Lord, you had better come with me, to be there when the lieutenant arrives."

In a few seconds Rona and Hugh Ellsworth were left alone in the operating theater. For Rona there was a certain embarrassment about being alone with Dr. Ellsworth in those first confused moments. The year before, when she had worked for him in the Neurological Clinic, she had developed a strong admiration for this dark, attractive young man, with his uncanny insight into the human mind and his fierce absorption in his work. Her association with him had been exciting—too exciting, in fact.

That had been one of the main reasons why she had applied for a transfer to surgery and the secure dullness of Dr. Knudsen. She was far too level-headed a girl to let herself do anything so futureless as fall in love with a young man for whom women were either problems in psychiatry or impersonal automatons to promote the efficiency of the clinic.

"This isn't so good, is it, Rona?" Hugh Ellsworth's dark eyes met hers with grave sympathy.

"It's incredible. Do you really think it was murder?"

"Hard to see any alternative."

"But Dr. Knudsen, of all people! He was so conscientious, so unself-seeking. It's fantastic to think he had any enemies."

"Sometimes you can be too conscientious and too unself-seeking for your own safety." Ellsworth's voice was thoughtful. "Knudsen was a fighter for his ideals. He would willingly have sacrificed himself for them. He wouldn't have hesitated to sacrifice anyone else, either." His lips had gone rather tight. "It's not hard for me to see how he might have had enemies."

He was right, of course. Dr. Knudsen's stubborn code of ethics had often antagonized Dr. Broderick and the other more practical members of the staff.

Suddenly, for the first time since Dr. Knudsen's collapse, there came flooding back to Rona memories of the extraordinary conversation she had overheard in the Chief's office. While she was trying to make up her mind whether she should tell Hugh Ellsworth about it, his quiet voice broke through her thoughts:

"Well, Rona, we're supposed to see that the doctor's office is locked up."

Together they moved through the scrubroom into Dr. Knudsen's private office. It was sparsely furnished with the desk, a glass-

fronted drug cabinet, a closet where the Chief had kept the white coats which he wore when making his hospital rounds. At the far end a second door led to the main corridor.

"That door was always locked on the outside," Rona explained. "Dr. Knudsen was the only person who had a key."

"So no one except Knudsen could get in here without coming through the anesthetizing room or the scrubroom first?"

Rona nodded. "And the key to the door from the scrubroom's on a shelf of the drug cabinet. Dr. Knudsen kept it there where I could get it to lock up after work in the theater finished for the day. The cabinet's always locked. But I keep a key."

They crossed to the small drug cabinet and Rona unlocked it. As Ellsworth picked up the door key which lay on the bottom shelf, Rona glanced swiftly through the drugs, wondering if there might be some sign of the poison which had killed the Chief. But the supplies all ranged neatly in order told her nothing. Dr. Knudsen had kept there only drugs that might be needed in an emergency during operations. On the shelves in their customary places were the rolls of adhesive, bandages, three hypodermic syringes, a stethoscope, adrenalin, morphine tablets, a package of insulin ampules, alcohol, and digitalis.

Rona locked the cabinet and they both turned to the desk. The lunch tray still lay there in front of Dr. Knudsen's empty chair.

"Looks as if he didn't eat anything," said Ellsworth quietly. "But he must have drunk some coffee."

With sudden vividness Rona remembered the last glimpse she had caught of Dr. Knudsen in his office, standing with the coffee cup raised to his lips. "Yes, he did." Shakily she added, "You don't suppose the coffee could have been poison?"

"That's something for your brother to find out." Hugh Ellsworth's mouth was grim. "I'll see he gets it down to Peters for analysis right away."

For a moment they stood there in silence, staring at the half-empty coffee cup. Then they moved out into the scrubroom, Hugh Ellsworth locking the door after them.

"Your brother's probably here by now," he said. "I should get down to Broderick's office. Are you coming?"

"I think I'd better wait till I'm called for. It's one of my jobs to keep the operating-room ready for any emergency case that may come in. You never know when it'll be needed." Rona gave a little shiver. "It's pretty awful having to work in there, now the Chief's dead. But I guess hospital routine must go on."

Hugh Ellsworth watched her for a second with faintly amused admiration. Impulsively he took her hand and squeezed it. "That's the kid. You're not going to let this get you down, are you?"

In spite of herself Rona was very conscious of the warm strength of his fingers. It was rather frightening to find that she could still feel the old excitement at being with him. She said awkwardly, "I can bear up, all right. It's no worse for me than the rest of you."

The young doctor's smile came and went suddenly. "I always thought you were the spunkiest as well as the prettiest nurse in the hospital, Rona. Now I'm sure of it."

Before she could speak, he left her.

It was cold and cheerless in the empty operating theater. The daylight was fading quickly. Rona switched on the heavy arc light above the table, drew up a high stool, and mechanically started her work, cleaning the instruments and slipping them into the sterilizer.

Her mind, clear again now, reverted to the half-overhead quarrel she had interrupted between the Chief and Caroline Broderick. She struggled to remember the exact words that the Chief's sister had used:

... Of course, it's black-

mail...but I'd rather be blackmailed than have anything interfere with Linette's happiness.... And later Dr. Knudsen had said: You've made it my problem now.... I shall see that the whole matter is exposed and that all moneys are returned to you....

Could that be the explanation? Could someone actually have been extorting money from Mrs. Broderick? And, if so, had that person found out that Dr. Knudsen was planning to expose him at the Board Meeting that afternoon? Found out and murdered him?

Mrs. Broderick, who had inherited a huge fortune from her first husband's patent-medicine business, was, of course, a lucrative subject for any kind of extortion. But to Rona the Chief's sister, with her social ambitions and her hardboiled determination to obtain a "blueblooded" husband for her daughter, had always seemed far too close-fisted to allow herself to be victimized.

And yet, . . . Linette's happiness....

If there was one weak spot in Caroline Broderick's hard, social, armor it was her devotion to the beautiful and talented daughter of her first marriage, Linette Clint. Rona had learned that only a short time ago, when she had acted as nurse for Linette after the girl had undergone a minor

operation. During Linette's convalescence in the hospital, Caroline Broderick had been an institutional menace, with her almost hourly visits and her constant complaints that her daughter was not getting the attention she rated.

Yes, if Linette's happiness were at stake it was perfectly credible that Mrs. Broderick would go to any length to try and save it.

But blackmail...Linette...how they tied up with the other thing Dr. Knudsen had mentioned—that he would *express his point of view* to the directors about Mrs. Broderick's *grant*?

She was trying to piece it all together as, her fingers working with efficiency, she sat in the operating theater, alone.

Suddenly the double doors were thrown open, and Oliver Lord strode across the threshold. His face was dead-white under the fiery red mat of his hair. "I thought surgeons, anesthetists, and nurses were supposed to be angels of mercy," he said bitterly. "Apparently one of us three is an angel of death."

Ever since she had first known him as a redhead kid of an intern who had tried in a rather clumsy way to rush her, Oliver Lord had over dramatized everything. But Rona had never before seen him look so shaken.

"What are you talking about, Oliver? Which three of us?"

"All three of us. You and Venner and me, of course. They've traced Knudsen's lunch tray and that darn coffee cup from the diet kitchen. It was sent up on the dumb-waiter direct to Knudsen's office, and it arrived just before he went back there after his morning rounds. The outside door was locked. The only way anyone could have got at it was through the theater or the anesthetizing room; and the only people who would have done that were you and me and, I guess, Venner."

"Then the coffee on the lunch tray *was* poisoned?"

"Poisoned!" He snorted. "Peters, in the analytical department, gave a couple of drops to a rat and it died within two minutes—typical atropine-hyoscine reactions."

Oliver Lord swung himself onto a stool, running agitated fingers through his hair. "Knudsen must have drunk the coffee just before he went in to scrub. Couldn't have taken it earlier, or he'd have died before he'd got through sterilizing." He twisted around to face Rona. "That policeman brother of yours is damn' polite and cagey, but I could tell all the time he half suspected me. Suspected me! As if I would have killed the Chief!" He got up and started pacing back and forth across the tiles of the floor. "You know how I felt about Knudsen, Rona. He was swell to me, picked

me out of a dozen of us to be his assistant, gave me every break. It's hellish funny I've got to be the one suspected of murdering him."

Trying to keep calm, Rona said, "I don't suppose you're suspected any more than Venner or I, are you?"

"You!" he echoed. "Lieutenant Heath's hardly going to suspect his own kid sister. And, as for Venner, everyone knows he's just a dried-up old dodo who's worshiped Knudsen for twenty-odd years. Venner, with his anesthesia and his fussy little side job of filing the records—no one in his sane mind's going to suspect him."

He stopped in front of Rona, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets. "That leaves just one honest-to-goodness murderer, sweetheart, and that's me. Of course, I didn't go into the Chief's office before he got there; but there is no one to prove I didn't."

"You're crazy to pretend you're the only suspect," Rona said. "Even if you do count Venner and me out, there's Mrs. Broderick. She was in the Chief's office before the operation."

"Caroline!" Oliver's mouth dropped open. "What was she doing here?"

"I don't know. But they were having a pretty violent argument."

The young intern stared at her.

"You're not implying that Caroline poisoned her own brother?"

Rona was cynical enough to know what lay behind the indignant incredulity in his tone. A few months ago Oliver would never have leaped to the defense of Mrs. Broderick. But it was very different now that the Director's wife had taken him up socially as one of the attractive young men whom she used to swell Linette's stag lines.

In the past Rona had thought a great deal of this aggressive, hard-headed boy from a hick town who had worked his way through medical school and who had spent every minute of his spare time on his thyroid research. They had been good friends, indulging themselves occasionally in a supper and a movie. All that and some of Rona's respect for him had vanished before the new, social Oliver Lord, who danced attendance on Linette Clint and her mother.

He was repeating, "You really think Caroline murdered the Chief?"

"I'm only pointing out," Rona snapped, "that she had as much of an opportunity as the rest of us."

"But it's crazy. She was his sister; she—was fond of him."

"I never noticed it. I never knew Caroline Broderick cared about anything except her own

money and the chances of pulling a husband for Linette out of the *Social Register*. But of course you would stand up for a woman who pours champagne into you by the quart."

Oliver gazed at her, his face blank. Then he gripped her arms roughly. "It's about time we had this out. Why the hell shouldn't I go to Linette's parties? She's a swell girl."

"I'm glad you like her."

"I like Caroline Broderick a lot, too. She shows an intelligent interest in my thyroid research."

"So that's the idea, is it? You're hoping she'll come across with a big, fat grant. Well, you're wasting your time. Mrs. Broderick may be rich and she may throw thousand-dollar parties, but she's as tough and as tight as they come when it's a question of giving money away to impecunious young men." She added wildly, "And if you're figuring on marrying Linette Clint..."

She broke off, and they stood staring at each other.

Finally, with savage sarcasm, Oliver said, "Thank you for your invaluable warning, Nurse Heath. But I haven't the slightest intention of trying to marry Linette Clint. Even if I had, there wouldn't be the remotest chance for me, because she happens to be very much in love and almost engaged to Governor Drayton's son."

"So you go to her parties purely for the love of research," flared Rona.

"I go to her parties because I decided it was about time I started to have some fun. I'm through with mooning around after a girl who's too stuck on herself to realize I exist."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Figure it out for yourself. Or do I have to scribble sonnets to you all over the hospital walls?"

"To me?" echoed Rona.

"That's what I said. Have you been too dumb to guess the way I've always felt about you?"

His face, with its firm mouth and intensely blue eyes, was very close to hers. For one crazy moment Rona thought he was going to kiss her. She tugged herself away. "I haven't the slightest idea how you've always felt about me," she said. "But I'm beginning to see how you feel about me now that you're in a spot and you know I've got a brother on the police force."

Oliver's lips parted, showing strong white teeth. "That's a pretty filthy thing to say."

"Is it?"

"It is. Just because you've always been crazy for the high-souled Ellsworth you're about as conscious of the way other people happen to feel as a patient under ether." He gave a harsh laugh. "You say I'm wasting my time

on Linette Clint. Well, I can tell you you're wasting a hell of a lot more time on Ellsworth. If ever he falls for a girl it'll be one with a pile of dough to sink in neurology. Shouldn't be surprised if he hadn't tried for the Clint millions already and..."

"That's a lie," cut in Rona heatedly. "Hugh Ellsworth's never been interested in Linette. He's—he's just her doctor and..."

She broke off sharply as the doors rolled open and Gregory Venner appeared on the threshold. The anesthetist looked so broken, so pathetic, that she forgot her indignation at Oliver and moved toward him.

"I'm terribly sorry for you, Mr. Venner. Dr. Knudsen was your friend."

"Thank you, thank you, Miss Heath." Gregory Venner shook his head dazedly. "Yes. I can hardly believe it. I shall miss him. He was very good to me. I was at his apartment for dinner last night, you know. He seemed so well and happy. We were making plans to go to Switzerland this spring. It's been the dream of my life to climb the Jungfrau, and now, when everything was almost arranged at last..." He broke off.

Oliver Lord relaxed the stiff line of his shoulders and said with unconvincing casualness. "At least, I hope you haven't been

all but accused of murdering him the way I was."

"I do not feel anyone would accuse me of murdering Dr. Knudsen." The anesthetist looked up at him with sudden dignity. "Lieutenant Heath did question me about my movements, but he says it is not possible for me to have figured in the case anyway. He says the poison must have been put in the coffee. At the time when the tray was sent up to Knudsen's room I was out to lunch with Peters, and when finally I came up here Dr. Knudsen was already in the office with Mrs. Broderick."

"So you knew Mrs. Broderick was there, too?" said Rona.

"Why, yes. She has a very penetrating voice. Both the orderly and I heard it through the wall of the anesthetizing room." Gregory Venner fingered his watch chain. "Although it was most embarrassing to have to mention it in the presence of Dr. Broderick, I could not very well have kept the fact back from the lieutenant."

Rona was relieved that the anesthetist should have taken on his shoulders the responsibility of telling Jim about Caroline Broderick's visit. And yet she felt sorry for him. Gregory Venner's almost idolatrous respect for the Chief was equaled only by his fear of Dr. Broderick. She realized what an ordeal it must have been

for him to have to tell Dr. Broderick that his wife at least had an opportunity to commit the crime.

She realized too that, now Dr. Knudsen was dead, Gregory Venner was completely at the mercy of Dr. Broderick's reshuffling plans. In his ruthless drive for hundred per cent efficiency in all departments, the Director had decided some time ago that Venner was inadequate to act the dual role of Dr. Knudsen's anesthetist and keeper of the hospital records. On several occasions the Director had tried to ease him out, and would have succeeded if it had not been for Dr. Knudsen's stanch support of the man who had once saved his life. Now it looked as if this day might well deprive Gregory Venner not only of his old friend, but also of his position in the hospital.

The anesthetist had been looking at her in what seemed like nervous hesitation. At length, he said, "Miss Heath, I—I have a very awkward question to ask you. There is something I thought I overheard Mrs. Broderick say. I did not tell the lieutenant, because I was not entirely sure and—and it is not the sort of thing one should mention unless one is completely certain of the facts."

"What was it?"

"You must have heard something of the conversation that

was going on in Dr. Knudsen's office when you went in to tell him we were ready for him to operate. Did"—he coughed—"did you by any chance hear Mrs. Broderick mention the word blackmail?"

For a moment Rona hesitated. Then, impulsively, she passed on to them exactly what she had overheard in the Chief's office.

"So—so I was right," murmured the anesthetist at length. "Your brother told me that he wanted to see you in Dr. Broderick's office right away. You must tell him all this, Miss Heath. We cannot hold it back."

"Of course we can't," agreed Rona.

"But this gives the murder motive!" Oliver had swung round to her. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was going to—but we got sidetracked being—rude to each other." All Rona's indignation had faded.

"This is swell for me, isn't it?" he exclaimed in a hard, grating voice. "Your brother's alibied Venner out of the picture. Mrs. Broderick would hardly have been extorting money from herself. That leaves me as the only person who could have put the poison in that coffee and who could have had a motive. Everyone knows I've been doing my darn'dest to get her to finance my research." He gave a sharp laugh. "When

you see your brother, Rona, why don't you tell him to arrest me straight away?"

Lieutenant James Heath, of the Homicide Division, was in the Director's office when Rona entered a moment later. She had never seen her brother at work on a case before. Somehow it did not seem real for him to be sitting there so very solemn.

Dr. Broderick drew up a chair for her and gave her an uneasy, rather forced smile. "We are grateful to your brother for promising to do his best to keep this terrible thing as quiet as possible, Miss Heath," he said. "He is also prepared to let all of you who are involved continue with your regular duties."

Jim was looking at Rona across the desk, his square hands playing with a pencil. Concisely he checked with her on the lunch-time movements of the operating team and on the events immediately preceding Dr. Knudsen's death. He concluded: "We've got the physical set-up fairly straight. What we want is a motive. You were close to Knudsen. Have you anything to suggest?"

Very conscious of the effect her words produced, she told them exactly what she and Venner had heard pass between the Chief and Mrs. Broderick.

In the long silence that followed, her brother stared at her

without speaking. Finally he shifted his steady gaze to the Director. "Would you be able to throw any light on this?"

"I don't understand it at all—not at all. All I know is that my wife came to the hospital this afternoon for a sinus treatment. She is still here. I think it far better for you to take the matter up with her."

He rang for his secretary and told her to ask Mrs. Broderick to come there as soon as possible.

Jim was still watching him, slightly skeptical. "It really means nothing to you, Dr. Broderick—not even Dr. Knudsen's reference to expressing his point of view toward some grant at the Directors' Meeting?"

"Oh, ah, the grant! Yes. I am conversant with Knudsen's point of view toward the grant. We had discussed it several times. But I cannot see how it could have the slightest bearing upon what has happened." Dr. Broderick passed a smoothing hand across his hair. "You see, my wife is a very rich woman in her own right. Last week she generously offered to donate a quarter of a million dollars to the hospital to be divided among certain—ah—specified departments."

"The matter was going in front of the Board this afternoon?"

"That is correct."

"And Knudsen was planning to oppose it?"

"Why, yes." The Director had picked up a pencil and was tapping with it on the desk. "My brother-in-law was an unusual man in many ways. He had a—well, a very strict code of ethics, Lieutenant. And I'm afraid his exacting conscience sometimes conflicted with what I consider the practical interests of the institution.

"My wife's money is inherited from her first husband, who made a large fortune as manufacturer of Clint Home Remedies. While these products are harmless in themselves, they cannot be said to conform to the highest standards of medicine. Although he was Caroline's brother, Knudsen was opposed to our accepting the grant, because he felt that, by doing so, we would seem to be endorsing remedies that militate against the ethics of our profession by advocating self-medication in disease."

"You feel he was being too squeamish?"

"I—ah—" Dr. Broderick coughed pompously. "Of course, a great hospital like this cannot afford to be associated with the Clint Remedy Company. But we are sorely in need of funds, and I see no cause to refuse a grant which comes from my wife as a private individual and under the name of the Broderick Foundation."

The lieutenant's eyes were very

alert as he asked, "If the grant is accepted, how is it to be divided?"

"The larger part is to go to—ah—my own special department of gynecology and to Dr. Ellsworth's Neurological Clinic. There is also a third endowment in my brother-in-law's own department. It was to establish a fellowship to assist young Lord in thyroid research."

Rona stiffened in her chair. So Oliver had got what he had tried to get out of Mrs. Broderick.

Jim Heath asked, "If the grant was not accepted it would be a very big disappointment to you people who stood to benefit by it—you, Ellsworth, and that young man Lord, wouldn't it?"

"Naturally. And to many others, also." Dr. Broderick was rather injured. "But it is not my wife's intention to distribute money to us for our own personal use. It is purely for the general good of the hospital."

"But Knudsen was going to oppose it." In a voice which concealed the challenge implied in his words, Jim added: "In a way he was standing between certain people and a lot of money, wasn't he? Lord, for example—there he was in Knudsen's own department, knowing that Knudsen was going to do his best to keep him from getting a fellowship. That wouldn't have made him feel any too friendly, would it?"

Rona's fingers were digging into her palms as she waited for Dr. Broderick's reply.

"I think Knudsen's attitude would have alienated Lord just as much as it alienated the rest of us," the Director was saying frigidly. "But I might tell you that our directors are already familiar with my brother-in-law's overscrupulousness on financial matters. As a single member of the Board he could never have brought the other eleven around to his point of view."

"Then you mean Knudsen couldn't have stopped the grant being accepted?"

"Not possibly."

"Not even," asked Lieutenant Heath softly, "if he could have shown that it had been extorted from your wife by blackmail?"

Dr. Broderick opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again as the door was thrown suddenly open and Caroline Broderick came into the room.

Dr. Knudsen's sister was deathly pale; her face was completely without expression. She crossed to her husband's side.

"Hugh Ellsworth's just—just been telling me about Thegen," she said. "It's terrible—it's fantastic, completely incredible. But before we do anything we've got to see the news doesn't come out in the papers. While Linette's staying at Drayton's house, with her engagement hanging in the balance, it

will be appalling if all the headlines blaze the fact that her uncle has been murdered."

She swung round fiercely to Jim. "You're the policeman, the lieutenant in charge or whatever you call it, aren't you? Please, please see that this is kept quiet."

Lieutenant Heath was looking at her with calm steadiness. "I'm afraid I'm rather more interested in finding out who murdered your brother than in worrying about your daughter's convenience or inconvenience at the moment. Perhaps you'd take a chair. I have a few questions."

This unexpected counter-attack had a deflating effect upon Mrs. Broderick. Without another word she dropped into a chair.

He said, "You were in your brother's office this afternoon just before the operation, weren't you?"

"I was."

"When you went into the room with your brother, did you notice his lunch tray?"

"Why, yes. It was on the dumb-waiter, and Thegn took it over to his desk. He was planning to eat it, but—why do you want to know?"

Without replying, Jim continued, "You were with your brother up to the time he went into the scrubroom?"

"Yes. I—I stayed on. Then I went out through the anesthetizing room."

"And all that time no one came in?"

"No one at all. We were entirely alone. That is, until Miss Heath came to tell Thegn the patient was ready."

Caroline Broderick looked at him rather wildly, and then, as if light had dawned precipitously, she flashed a glance at Rona. "I see what you've been trying to prove. Miss Heath told you Thegn and I were quarreling. You're—you're suspecting me of killing him, my own brother. That's absurd."

The steely note still in his voice, Lieutenant Heath asked, "What were you quarreling with your brother about, Mrs. Broderick?"

There was a fraction of a second before Caroline Broderick answered. Rona thought she saw a flicker of fear in her eyes, and when the woman spoke it was with incoherent swiftness: "We were just arguing about the grant I am offering the hospital. My husband must have told you about it and about my brother's objections."

"You're sure that was all you talked about, Mrs. Broderick? I think it's only fair to tell you that two different people overheard you use the word *blackmail*."

"Blackmail!" Caroline Broderick's tongue came out to moisten scarlet lips. "Maybe I did use that word. I don't remember."

She added hurriedly, "It is blackmail in a way, in any case—doctors getting money out of a rich woman for their wretched hospital! They know you can't very well refuse and have everyone think you're not—not performing your civic duty. They do hold you up at the point of a gun. Yes." She nodded vigorously as if she felt she had a good point. "That's what I mean."

"And that's what you said to your brother?"

"Yes, yes."

"And his only objection to having the directors accept the grant was the fact that your money came from the Clint Home Remedies?"

"That's right."

Jim took a shot in the dark: "Mrs. Broderick, listen to me carefully. I understand that your daughter was here in the hospital recently for an operation. A great deal about a person is liable to come out when she's in a hospital. I've been thinking about it, and there's a possibility that someone threatened to expose something damaging about your daughter if you didn't give the hospital a quarter-million dollars. Isn't that what you meant by blackmail, and isn't that the real reason why Dr. Knudsen was going to see that the grant was refused and that all moneys were returned to you?"

While she listened with staring

eyes, Caroline Broderick's cheeks had turned from white to a dull, ashen gray. "That's not true. It's ridiculous. I haven't given the hospital any money yet—how could it return any moneys to me?"

Unsteadily she rose to her feet, and once again she turned distractedly to her husband. "George, tell him it's all a lie. Tell him . . . I won't answer any more preposterous questions. The shock of the news—and the pain of my sinus treatment . . . I'm not myself . . . I think I'm going to faint."

Her voice faded. With a little sigh she crumpled sideways to the floor.

While the Director hovered ineffectually, Jim sprang forward and, picking Caroline Broderick up, carried her to a couch. "Quick, Rona. Water."

Rona brought some from the cooler.

Dr. Broderick seemed completely nonplussed by this sudden collapse of anyone as strong-willed as his wife. He stood absolutely still, staring, while Jim tilted the water to Mrs. Broderick's lips and Rona sent the secretary running for Dr. Ellsworth, who was the Brodericks' family physician.

The moments of waiting were tense. Rona's mind was keyed up, oddly undecided. Had this faint been genuine? Or had Mrs.

Broderick used it as a device to forestall any further questioning?

Soon Hugh Ellsworth arrived, was told what had happened, and made a swift, expert examination.

"Nothing serious," he said at length. "Just a faint. But all this must have been a big shock to her." He turned to Dr. Broderick: "I think it would be better if we put her to bed here in the hospital for a while."

"Yes, yes," assented the Director. "Miss Heath, tell my secretary to have a room prepared for Mrs. Broderick in the Ives Wing."

Within a few minutes they had taken Mrs. Broderick away. Ellsworth and Dr. Broderick followed, leaving Rona with Jim.

Lieutenant Heath said, "Well, Ro, you certainly gave me a break overhearing that conversation."

"You really think she was blackmailed into giving that grant?"

"Either into giving the grant or into giving cash to someone."

"And Dr. Knudsen got killed because he was planning to expose the blackmail?"

"Seems that way." Jim tapped on the desk. "Doesn't look as if we've got many suspects to pick from, either. Mrs. Bodenick's obviously keeping back a whole raft of evidence; but I don't see how the motive could be twisted around to her. I've checked up on the rest of them. Venner's alibied up to the last minute.

Broderick and that guy Ellsworth were both out of the hospital when the operation was being performed. We've got to believe Knudsen was killed by that poisoned coffee." He paused. "And there isn't anyone who had the physical chance of doing it except Lord—and you."

Surprised by her own indignation, Rona said, "You can't seriously think it's Oliver Lord. It's, absolutely fantastic!"

"Fantastic for him to kill a man who, if we're right, was going to expose the fact that he'd extorted money out of Mrs. Broderick?"

"That's what I mean. Oliver couldn't have blackmailed Mrs. Broderick. I'm not a fool. You know that. And I tell you it's just not in his character." She added: "Anyway, you suggested just now that Mrs. Broderick had been victimized by someone who'd found out something about Linette when she was here in the hospital. Well, Oliver had nothing to do with that case. I was the nurse in charge and I know."

Jim's eyes showed interest. "What was she operated on for?"

"It was just a small brain operation to correct an old injury. It wasn't serious."

"I see. And who had anything to do with that operation?"

"Hugh Ellsworth diagnosed the case and recommended the operation, of course. But it was performed by a brain surgeon with

his own team—people quite different. I was working in Ellsworth's Neurological Clinic then. That's why I nursed Linette afterward." Rona added stubbornly, "Oliver Lord knew nothing about it."

Jim was watching her with a faint smile. "You don't happen to be stuck on Lord, do you?"

"Me? Don't be ridiculous!" Rona felt the color flooding her cheeks. "He's a perfectly nice person but he—he makes me madder than anyone I ever knew. I just can't have you suspecting him, when he couldn't possibly have killed anyone."

"Redheaded young surgeons can kill people just as well as the next guy, probably a great deal better." The smile was still in Jim's eyes, but it was a smile without humor. "You say Lord had nothing to do with Miss Clint's operation. But he knew her and Mrs. Broderick, didn't he?"

"He went to several parties at their house."

"Was he chasing money for his research' or chasing Miss Clint?" Jim asked suddenly. "I hear she's an attractive girl. I also hear she's going around a lot with Governor Drayton's son. Suppose Lord hoped for an heiress, felt mad when he lost out, and figured the least he could do was to get a little gravy out of the mother and..."

He stopped as the door opened and Hugh Ellsworth reappeared.

"Mrs. Broderick's come round all right, Lieutenant. But she's still pretty shaky and we've decided to keep her in the hospital until tomorrow. Wouldn't advise you to try and get any more out of her until she's quieted down a bit."

"Okay," said Jim. "I guess I can leave her a while until she's got her story straight."

Ellsworth smiled. "I'll go and tell . . ."

He had moved to the door, but Jim's quiet voice called him back: "While you're here, Dr. Ellsworth, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions. Do you know anything about this grant Mrs. Broderick was planning?"

"Do I know anything about it?" Ellsworth crossed back to the desk. "I ought to. We're hopelessly in the red here, you know, and we've all been doing everything short of murder to get Mrs. Broderick to crash through with that quarter-million."

"And which of you was finally successful in persuading her?"

"I don't want to boast, but I think I take most of the credit. Broderick did his part. Young Lord even went so far as to dress up in evening clothes and dance, when he wanted to stay at home with his thyroid researches. But I think I probably worked the hardest."

"I see." Jim's tone was very alert. Suddenly changing his tack, he asked, "Mrs. Broderick is fond of her daughter, isn't she?"

"Psychopathically, so."

Lieutenant Heath looked down at the polished surface of the desk. "You said the bunch of you around here did everything short of murder to get that grant. I'm interested in that remark, interested to know how far you'd have gone. If, for example, one of you knew something damaging about Linette Clint, would you have used that for a lever on Mrs. Broderick?"

Hugh Ellsworth's smile faded. "You don't seem to have a very high opinion of the medical profession, do you?"

"I can't afford to have a high opinion of anyone."

"Well, maybe you're right. But if you're wondering whether I personally blackmailed Mrs. Broderick into giving us that grant, I think I can put your mind at rest."

"Perhaps you don't know a great deal about the work we neurologists do. By the time we're through with a patient, we know absolutely everything about him and his friends and relations, and often what we know isn't any too savory. Right now, for example, I have under treatment a dozen, twenty, fifty people who come from the wealthiest and most respectable families in town. Some

of them are drunks, some of them are moral wrecks, some of them—I needn't run through the more intricate features of mental unbalance. But, if I were in for blackmailing my patients and my ex-patients, I'd never have to waste my time worming a paltry quarter-million dollars out of Caroline Broderick."

Jim said, "Thank you for making your point so clear, Dr. Ellsworth."

"On the contrary, thank you."

Jim rose. "Well, since Mrs. Broderick has gone into retirement, my next job is looking through Knudsen's papers. Come on, Rona, I guess you're the best person to show me the ropes."

Rona moved to follow him, but surprisingly Ellsworth stepped in front of her. He said to Jim, "Rona may be your sister, but she's paid by the hospital, not by the police force. And, since I'm planning to try to get her back into my clinic, I take a paternal interest in her well-being." He smiled. "Rona's had a very tough day and it's long past dinner time. She's coming out to eat with me."

Lieutenant Heath hesitated by the door, watching both of them. Then, the grim line of his mouth relaxing, he said, "Okay. Give her some food. I'll take Knudsen's papers back to Headquarters with me." He left.

Hugh Ellsworth, w a t c h i n g,

Rona, looked suddenly serious. "Tell me, does he really think someone's been extorting money out of Caroline and that she's holding back on him?"

Rona nodded.

"I see." There was a curious curve to his lips. Then he patted her arm and said, "Go get yourself out of that starched prison uniform into something gay. We'll find a place downtown for dinner and forget all this business for an hour or so."

And, when finally they were settled in a little French restaurant, Rona found that she could almost forget that the real reason for her sitting there with Hugh Ellsworth was that Dr. Knudsen had been murdered.

Ellsworth talked with infectious enthusiasm for the clinic and his plans for its future. For Rona it was as if the clock had been turned back to the exhilarating days when he had been her boss.

They were sipping their coffee, when he broke off with an odd expression, half mocking, half affectionate, on his face. "Well, Rona, I meant it just now when I told your brother I was planning to get you back into the clinic." He hesitated, and added suddenly, "But I want you to tell me something. Why did you walk out on me last year?"

"It's all very simple. You see, I have no illusions about my fatal

fascination. I started getting too—too interested in you as a person, and I had enough sense to see it was a stupid thing to do. I quit while the quitting was painless."

"You were a smart girl, my dear."

"To realize I was wasting my time?"

"On the contrary. If you'd stayed any longer, I would probably have asked you to marry me and you might even have accepted."

"And would that have been so terrible?"

"Frightful!" He grinned. "Frightful for you, that is. A psychiatrist may make a passable boss, but he makes the worst husband in the world. He's seen far too much of what goes on in the human mind. To him love's just a compulsion neurosis that marriage aggravates, and a wife's just someone who'll bring a whole new raft of complexes into the family." He leaned across the table and patted her hand. "You ought to be eternally grateful you didn't wait around in the clinic for that marriage proposal."

"Oliver said you'd never marry," Rona told him. "At least, he said you never would unless you found a girl with a lot of money to sink in research—a girl like Linette Clint."

"So that's Lord's analysis of me, is it?" Hugh Ellsworth's smile

was still amused. "Nice, healthy reaction, too. He's the sort of person a smart girl should marry, Rona—a young man with a lot of muscle and a lot of masculine contempt for human textbooks like me." He added, glancing up at her, "As for Linette Clint, she's another smart girl. And she's going to make a good wife for that boy of hers."

While he spoke, a newboy came into the restaurant with a sheaf of late night papers. Ellsworth signaled him and bought a copy.

As he unfolded it and looked at the front page, he said, "I guess the time has come when the world's to be let in on the little secret I've been sharing with Linette. Yes, here it is." He handed the paper to Rona.

#### DRUG HEIRESS IN RUNAWAY MATCH WITH GOVERNOR'S SON

*Linette Clint, heiress to the Clint Home Remedy fortune, and Charles Gormley Drayton, III, Governor Drayton's son, slipped across the state line and were privately married last night. The young couple eloped from the Governor's mansion itself, where Linette Clint had been staying as a house guest. As yet neither the bride's nor the groom's families have made a statement but...*

When she put the paper down Ellsworth was watching her as if

he were intensely interested in her reaction.

"Your brother thinks Caroline's holding back on him," he said slowly. "If he's right, I have a very good hunch this news will make Mrs. Broderick reshuffle her plans."

"You mean she doesn't know anything about the elopement?"

Ellsworth shook his head. "Nothing. It's just a little something worked out by Linette, Charlie Drayton, and myself."

As he paid the check and they went out of the restaurant, he added enigmatically, "I wish to hell all my patients' problems were as easy to solve as Linette Clint's."

Ellsworth left Rona at the main entrance of the hospital and went to take the news of her daughter's elopement to Caroline Broderick. Rona hurried to her room in the nurses' quarters and changed into uniform.

When she returned to the main building, the loud-speakers in the corridors were calling, "Miss Heath wanted in Dr. Ellsworth's office."

When she reached the neurologist's room, Hugh Ellsworth was waiting for her. He said, "I had the right idea about Caroline. I never saw a patient respond to treatment the way she responded to that account of Linette's marriage. In two seconds she switched from the bereaved

sister to the delighted mother—and she's eager to unburden her soul about something."

"To the police?"

"No. She says she wants to see you."

"All right."

As Rona hurried along the corridor, she passed the open door of the record room. A voice called her name, and Gregory Venner hustled out. "Miss Heath, may I speak to you a minute?"

Rona stepped with him into the small room whose walls were lined with the filing cabinets where Venner kept the hospital case histories in meticulous order.

"I've been so worried, Miss Heath," he said. "I can't concentrate on my work, can't do anything, thinking about what has happened to Dr. Knudsen. Tell me, has—has Mrs. Broderick been able to help the police? Were we right about what we thought we heard?"

Rona told him how Mrs. Broderick had denied that there was any kind of blackmail. "But Jim believes she's lying," she concluded. "And she's just sent for me to tell me something important. So maybe we'll hear the truth now."

The anesthetist's face lightened. "I hope so, indeed. It's about the only thing left for me—to try to find out who killed Thegen." He threw out his hands in a rather forlorn gesture. "You see, already

Dr. Broderick has sent for me and told me I won't be needed any longer to administer anesthesia." He hesitated. "I always hoped that I had done my work satisfactorily. But you know how Broderick is—all for young people."

Rona thought it typical of Dr. Broderick—typical and entirely inhuman. Venner, who had worked for the hospital so long and who had devoted his life so completely to Dr. Knudsen—it was tragic to think of him thrown out into the world with nowhere to go just because the Director had this fanatical passion for super-efficiency.

Gregory Venner seemed to read her thoughts, for he gave a pale smile and said, "Please don't worry about it, Miss Heath. I have a little money. I'll be all right."

Impulsively Rona squeezed his hand. "We'll always remember you here," she said. "And if I find out anything about—about Dr. Knudsen, I'll let you know. Now I'd better get to Mrs. Broderick."

Hurrying down the passage, Rona took the elevator to the second floor and made her way to the Ives Wing, where Mrs. Broderick had been settled. As she moved down the long central passage, the door of one of the private rooms opened and Oliver Lord came out, followed by a nurse.

Oliver gave the nurse some rapid instructions and she hurried away. As soon as she was out of sight, he gripped Rona's arm and drew her roughly into one of the vacant private rooms. "I've got to talk to you," he said, his blue eyes very steady.

"What do you want to say?"

"I want to say a hell of a lot but I'll try and keep my language adequately censored." He moved closer, his strong hands crushing the white cotton of her sleeves. "You made some pretty raw cracks at me in the operating room this afternoon. In fact, you're a rude, ornery little piece, but I've got to know where I stand with you."

Rona tried to pull her arms away, but his grip was too tight. She said, "For heaven's sake, stop mauling me about, Oliver. I'm supposed to go to Mrs. Broderick."

"I'll stop mauling you about when I'm good and ready." He was looking at her with a kind of angry intensity. "And Caroline Broderick's as good a place to start as any other. I did go to a couple of her parties. I went to them purely and simply because I wanted her to crash through with the grant. That doesn't make me a gigolo, does it?"

"I haven't any idea what it makes you."

"Well, whatever it makes me, it tars your high-minded boy-

friend, Ellsworth, with the same brush. The hospital had to have money, and Mrs. Broderick was our one hope. He worked on her as much as I did."

"Why bother to explain to me?"

"I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea why. I bother about you at all." His jaw was thrust out aggressively. "I think you're badly stuck on yourself; I think a lot of things. But for some godforsaken reason I'm stuck on you, too. I told you that this afternoon, and you paid about as much attention to it as one of my experimental frogs. But I've been that way for a long, long time, and I don't give a hoot whether you do any reciprocating or not. I just want you to believe me when I say that for better or worse I think you're swell."

Rona could not help smiling. "Oliver, you're being utterly ridiculous."

He was not smiling. Suddenly his arms slipped around her. He pulled her toward him, and his lips met hers in a long, rough kiss. In spite of her indignation the touch of his mouth on hers was warm—exciting.

"That's better," he said at length. He pushed her away and gazed at her from blue eyes that were still very belligerent. "Now run and tell your brother I'm trying to make up to you because I murdered Knudsen and want a good police connection."

"I'm sorry I said that to you this afternoon," said Rona sincerely.

"So you take it back, do you? That's grand. It'll give me something pleasant to think about when I'm behind bars waiting trial for Knudsen's murder."

"Trial? Oliver, what on earth are you talking about?"

"What are you looking wide-eyed about? You know perfectly well that brother of yours is all set to arrest me any minute. You talked to him, didn't you? So far as I can tell, he's built up the perfect case against me. Peters did a Vitali test on the coffee. He's proved the poison was there—hyoscine, and enough to kill twenty goats." He added savagely, "And, according to your brother, I'm the guy who put it there." For a moment he stood in silence, looking at her fixedly. "Rona, tell me something. Do you think I murdered the Chief?"

"Of course I don't."

A grim smile spread over his lips. But his eyes showed a queer sort of excitement. "Okay, Rona. If you're back of me it's worth taking a fighting chance. Things are going to be tough as hell. If Knudsen was poisoned by that coffee I don't see that I have a hope. But"—he paused, adding quickly—"it sounds crazy, Rona, but I'm going to try and prove that he wasn't poisoned by the coffee at all."

"But, Oliver, you've just said Peters proved the coffee was full of hyoscine."

"That's one of my points, exactly. I think the coffee was a lot *too* full of hyoscine. Rona, tell me, the Chief didn't take sugar in his coffee, did he?"

"He never took sugar in anything."

Oliver's excitement was increasing. "Then explain this. I've just thought of it. It's not easy to tell how hyoscine's administered, you know—even with an autopsy. It gets into the bloodstream almost immediately. But there's one very definite thing about it. It has an extremely bitter, unpleasant taste. If Knudsen had nothing to sweeten that coffee, how the hell could he have gulped down more than half of a cup without realizing something was wrong?"

"Oliver, you've got something there."

"You think so?"

"Yes. He surely would have noticed something was the matter if . . ." She broke off, adding lamely, "But the coffee was poisoned, and I, myself, saw him lift the cup to his lips. How can you explain that?"

Oliver looked suddenly tired and crestfallen. "I guess that's something I can't explain. I guess the whole idea was just one of those things. Forget it."

"Forget it! I certainly won't

forget it so long as you're in a jam and there may be some way of getting you out of it."

"You really mean that?" Oliver's eyebrows tilted upward. "You're actually being nice to me? I can't believe it." He leaned forward and kissed her again.

Feeling exhilarated against all reason, Rona hurried to Mrs. Broderick's room, which was just a few doors down the passage. She found the Director's wife sitting up in bed, looking very handsome. "I'm so glad you've come, Miss Heath."

Rona sat down on the chair by the bedside, watching her expectantly.

"Well, my dear,"—Mrs. Broderick's smile was affable—"I'm going to confess I lied this afternoon to your brother. That is, I held back some of the truth. You mustn't blame me, because I was in the most embarrassing position."

She leaned forward. "I am confiding in you, my dear, because you are Lieutenant Heath's sister and because you were very kind to Linette when you nursed her.... I knew absolutely nothing about her elopement until Hugh Ellsworth brought me the news. If I'd known about it earlier I would have acted very differently with the police."

Rona asked, "You mean it all somehow centered around Linette and her marriage?"

"Yes, my dear. Linette and her health." Caroline Broderick lowered her voice to an intimate softness. "It began some years ago when she was still a subdebutante. She suddenly started having fainting spells—rather like fits. You can imagine how I felt! I took her to a very famous neurologist in Chicago. After he'd studied the case he told me that Linette suffered from—epilepsy!"

"He took a very gloomy view and was doubtful whether she should ever get married. I was desperate. A short time later, however, when I came East, I took her to Hugh Ellsworth for a second opinion. A fine doctor, a wonderful man! He sent for the entire case history, kept Linette under observation for a long time, and—it was the happiest day of my life—he told me he was almost sure the diagnosis was wrong. He believed that the whole trouble came from an accident Linette had had as a child—that there was something pressing on the brain and that it could be corrected by a minor operation."

Mrs. Broderick leaned back against the pillows. "You know the rest. They did operate. And there've been no attacks since. Although Hugh Ellsworth says it's too early yet to state officially that the Chicago doctor was wrong, he's sure there was never any question of epilepsy at all."

Rona was beginning to understand now. "So you—you were being blackmailed. Someone was holding the epilepsy rumor over you to . . ."

"Yes, yes. But you can see why I was terrified of mentioning it even to the police. The Draytons were naturally ambitious for their only son." Mrs. Broderick said frankly, "I'm not much socially, and certainly money means nothing to them. I knew that if ever they had even a suspicion that something was wrong with the stock, they'd prevent Charlie from marrying Linette."

She nodded emphatically. "But now the dear young things have taken the matter into their own hands. Hugh's just told me. Linette went to him as her doctor and asked him if he really thought it was all right for her to marry. He assured her it was, and said that just so long as Charlie knew everything there was no need for the Governor to be told. Charlie had known all along, of course, and it made no difference. So they eloped."

Mrs. Broderick, still in a confidential mood, went on, "I can explain now the conversation you overheard between me and my brother. About two weeks ago I received an anonymous letter. Whoever wrote it stated that he knew everything about Linette and would pass it on to the Draytons unless I deposited \$25,000

in a certain place here in the hospital."

Rona broke in, "So it wasn't the grant that was blackmailed out of you!"

"The grant?" Mrs. Broderick looked indignant. "Of course not. I offered that money to the hospital entirely of my own free will in gratitude for what Hugh Ellsworth had done for Linette. This was something entirely different—a disgraceful piece of private extortion." She picked up the flimsy sleeve of her negligée and dropped it again. "I was horrified when I read that letter. Although I, myself, was sure the epilepsy diagnosis was wrong, I realized it could do almost as much damage with the Draytons as if it had been true."

She shrugged. "I deposited the money at the hospital in a suitcase, and hoped against hope it would keep the person quiet."

"But it didn't?"

"No. A second note came, and that time it asked for even more. By then I felt I had to confide in someone. I didn't want it to be my husband, because we haven't been married very long and I never discussed Linette with him. But Thern, my brother, he knew, and I thought I could trust him. Last week I told him everything and pleaded with him to find out who was responsible."

"And he did?"

"He promised to. I didn't hear

from him again until last night. He told me then that he had found out who had been doing it."

"And he told you the person's name?" asked Rona urgently.

"No." Mrs. Broderick shook her head. "You know how Thegen was. Whatever he did, he was always scrupulously fair. It seems that he had forced a confession out of this man and had made a bargain with him. If every penny of my twenty-five thousand was returned to me by today, he said he would take no action. If the money wasn't returned, he was going to expose the whole thing at the Board Meeting this afternoon."

"And the money wasn't returned?"

"It wasn't. That's why I came to the hospital this afternoon. I was simply desperate. I thought the whole idea was stupid from the start, and the very last thing I wanted was for Thegen to bring everything out into the open just when, as I thought, Linette's chances of marrying Charlie Drayton were hanging by a thread. I pleaded with him to let the whole thing drop. You heard me. But he was as obstinate as ever. The man had been given a chance to redeem himself and had failed, he said. Whatever embarrassment it caused, he was going to see that the whole thing came out and that the man was handed over to the police."

"But even then he didn't tell you the man's name?"

"Not even then. It's tragic that he didn't, of course. But it was absolutely typical. The Board Meeting wasn't until five thirty, and there was just a flimsy chance that the money would still be returned. He was going to keep his side of the bargain right up until the last minute."

She added firmly, "You see now why I've told you all this. You've got to promise to let your brother know everything. I would rather not speak to him myself until I've had some rest."

"Of course I'll tell Jim. And I'm sure he'll consider it absolutely confidential." Rona added, "You're sure you haven't any idea who this person could have been?"

"None." Mrs. Broderick returned her stare with a steady gaze. "That's something for your brother to find out. But certain people can be eliminated, can't they? Hugh Ellsworth told me they thought something on Thegen's lunch tray was poisoned. Who could have got at that tray?"

Rona said awkwardly, "No one but—but you and me and Oliver Lord."

"Oliver Lord!" echoed Caroline Broderick. For a moment she did not speak. Then, very softly, she said, "You don't think it would be Oliver Lord, do you? I hate to suggest it; he's always seemed

such a nice boy. But then he is in need of money."

Rona said stubbornly, "I know Oliver didn't poison that coffee."

"The coffee! What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know it was the coffee on the lunch tray that poisoned Dr. Knudsen?"

"The coffee on the lunch tray." Mrs. Broderick was staring at her now, the pupils of her eyes very wide. "No one ever told me that. There—there must be some mistake."

"But how could there be? Dr. Knudsen drank some of it, didn't he?"

"Yes. Not much, but he did sip some of it." Mrs. Broderick was still staring in amazement. "But he couldn't have been poisoned by it. You see, after he left, I was still very upset and angry. I wanted something to steady my nerves before going for my sinus treatment." She paused. "Thegn had left practically all the coffee in the cup. It was quite cold but—I drank it."

Rona stared at Mrs. Broderick, her thoughts swirling. "But Peters analyzed what was left in the cup and found enough hyoscine still there to kill several people!"

"Well, I'm not dead," said Mrs. Broderick reasonably. "And I drank from the same cup that Thegn did."

The truth suddenly screamed itself to Rona. Of course, there

was only one explanation. Mrs. Broderick had drunk some of the coffee after Dr. Knudsen and had suffered no ill effects. Obviously, the coffee could not have been poisoned at that time. The hyoscine must have been slipped into the dregs later. In other words, the coffee must have been poisoned *after* the murder! Dr. Knudsen must have been killed by hyoscine administered in something else.

As soon as she realized that, the whole plan and its purpose took logical shape in her mind. The murderer had wanted to make it look as if only the three on the operating team could have had an opportunity to commit the crime. Some time after Dr. Knudsen's death he must have slipped into the office, seen the half-drunk coffee, taken it for granted that Dr. Knudsen himself had drunk it, and planted the hyoscine in the cup.

Mrs. Broderick's sharp voice cut into her thoughts: "Miss Heath, can you make any sense of this coffee business?"

"Yes, yes. I see it now. Dr. Knudsen was killed in some other way."

"What way?"

What way...? Dr. Knudsen had eaten nothing from the lunch tray. That was certain. And yet hyoscine was a quick-acting drug; the Chief could not possibly have stayed alive as long as he did

if the poison had been administered before he came up to the operating-room floor.

In a vivid flash of memory there came to her a picture of Dr. Knudsen as she had seen him just before the operation that afternoon, when he had joined her in the scrubroom. He had been nibbling a lump of sugar!

Until that moment the incident had completely slipped her memory. Yet now it showed itself by far the most significant fact in the entire case. On several occasions Dr. Knudsen had told her of his habit of nibbling sugar to supply sufficient energy for any emergency task which involved missing a meal. If she knew of that practice of his, surely the murderer could have known of it, too. It would have been easy for him to substitute a poisoned lump of sugar for the one the Chief must have carried.

If that was really the way it had happened, if Dr. Knudsen actually had been killed by that lump of sugar, Oliver need be suspected no more than anyone else. The murderer might easily have been miles away from the hospital at the time the Chief died.

Excitedly she said, "Of course, we were all wrong, Mrs. Broderick. I understand now. Dr. Knudsen must have been poisoned by a piece of sugar. I—I saw him eating it just before he started to scrub."

The Director's wife looked at her rather skeptically. "Have you told Lieutenant Heath about this?"

"No, no. I'd forgotten. I never thought of it until this moment."

"Then I think you'd have difficulty in getting the police to believe you," said Mrs. Broderick sagely. "That brother of yours is smart. He'll think that you're just making up a story to throw suspicion off Oliver."

Rona's heart sank. That was true, of course. Coming so belatedly, anything she said about the sugar would sound pitifully unconvincing—particularly since Jim had made up his mind that she was rooting for Oliver against all comers. But again memory came to her aid.

"If I could produce some of the sugar and prove it was poisoned, Jim would have to believe me then."

"If you could do that."

"But I think I can. You see, Dr. Knudsen threw part of it into the linen basket. It—it might still be there. I could get it. I'll go get a flashlight from my room."

Mrs. Broderick called, "Don't be in such a hurry, child. If you really think you know something, you had better tell your brother."

"No. Jim's not here now. I've got to try to get it right away before—before anything can happen to it."

Mrs. Broderick protested again,

but Rona paid no attention. Her mind definitely made up, she hurried out into the passage.

As she hesitated on the threshold she had the queer impression that the door of one of the empty rooms opposite was moving—closing infinitesimally, as if someone had just that moment slipped through it. She felt her pulses tingling slightly. Was it possible that someone had been listening to their conversation? And had then darted behind the door opposite, so that he should not be seen? The idea seemed altogether too fantastic. Dismissing it, she hurried down the passage toward the stairs.

The operating room, she knew, would most certainly be locked at this time of night. But, as Dr. Knudsen's special nurse, she had an extra key to the door which led through the anesthetizing room.

Hurrying to her room in the nurses' building, she found the key and a flashlight, and then sped back to the hospital. Tense with excitement, she climbed the long stairs to the top floor. In the dim corridor-light the great double doors of the theater reared in front of her. She slipped past them to the small door which led into the anesthetizing room. At night this was the most deserted part of the hospital. Everything was still as death as she slid the key into the lock and opened the

door onto pitch-darkness.

Closing the door carefully behind her, she switched on her flashlight.

Vaguely wishing she had not come, she forced herself to penetrate into the scrubroom, where the gleaming white wash-basins reflected her light. One...two...three...Dr. Knudsen had used the third basin from the door.

She reached it and, with a sudden stab of excitement, saw that the towel basket had not been emptied. She bent over it and groped swiftly among the soiled towels. Almost at once her fingers touched something small and hard. She picked it up, holding it in the beam from her torch. Yes, it was a half-lump of sugar, with one end jagged and uneven where Dr. Knudsen had bitten it.

Then, suddenly, she stiffened and plunged the piece of sugar into the pocket of her uniform. What was that sound coming from the direction of the anesthetizing room? Had it been her imagination? Or was it a footprint?

She killed her flashlight. In the thick darkness she stood there straining her ears, every nerve in her body alive. The sound came again. She knew then that she had been right. There were footsteps in the adjoining room. Someone was moving, slowly, furtively, toward her.

For one paralyzed moment she stood motionless, pressed against

the cold porcelain of the washbasin. Every instinct warned her then that the invisible presence beyond her in the thick darkness was the murderer of Dr. Knudsen. She had been right. He must have been listening to her conversation with Mrs. Broderick, must have slipped into the room opposite, waited while she went to the nurses' home, and then here—followed her to stop her from getting that lump of sugar.

It was only then that she began to realize just how important it would be for the murderer to see that the true method of death were never brought to light. If this were really he, he would be desperate; he...

She cut her train of thought. She must not lose her head. She had to work out a plan. Should she switch on her flashlight? No. That would only give her position away. The safest chance was to stay perfectly still, to hope against reason that this person would not be able to trace her in the darkness.

The next moments were agony. The footsteps grew steadily nearer, but slow, shuffling, and uncertain. Then they stopped.

Gradually, as she became more accustomed to the obscurity, she found herself able to distinguish a form, a misty outline, poised on the threshold of the door which led from the anesthetizing room. It was impossible to distinguish

height or features. But the complete immobility of that figure was terrifying. There was something about it that reminded her of an animal of the night, watching, trying to gauge the exact position of its prey before it sprang. Then slowly it started forward again, veering toward her in her pathetically vulnerable position against the gleaming white of the washbasins.

Rona held her breath, struggling to check the convulsive trembling that had invaded her limbs. His progress toward her was so steady, so deliberate. He had seen her.

Suddenly she could bear it no longer, the suspense, the stifling darkness, the relentlessly moving presence. She cried, "Who is it? What do you want?"

Absolute silence followed, far more horrible than any reply could have been.

"Tell me. Who is it? Why don't you speak? Why...?" Her voice broke into a little strangled cry. The figure was almost on top of her now.

And, hanging poised in the darkness in front of her, catching illumination from some unknown source, she could make out a faint gleam of steel. She knew what it was. Even then, in the confused panic of that terrible moment, she recognized the cruel blade of a surgical knife.

There was only one thing to

do. Mustering all her strength, Rona plunged forward straight at the amorphous figure which grasped the knife. She felt hot breath on her face. A hand grabbed at her sleeve. But with a desperate effort she wrenched herself free, swirled round, and ran blindly out into the operating theater.

Something loomed in front of her—the sterilizer. Instinctively she slipped behind it, crouching in its shadow. For a while she could do nothing but try to silence the spasmodic sobs that shook her. She was free for the moment but—she realized it at once—she had only run into a trap. The operating theater was a dead end. The heavy double doors of the main entrance were locked on the outside. The door upstairs in the gallery was locked, too. There was no exit except the door to the scrub-room through which she had just come. And now, as she peered through the gloom, she saw the figure of her unknown assailant, blurred and indistinct, standing there on the threshold.

Wildly Rona looked around her. It was slightly lighter here in the operating theater than it had been in the scrubroom. She could make out the white tiles stretching away on all sides, and, beyond, the little staircase that led to the spectators' gallery.

*The spectators' gallery....* Suddenly, as all hope seemed

gone, she remembered a window in the gallery. It was seldom used. But—yes, she was sure—it gave onto a fire escape.

To reach the stairs leading to it she would have to run across half the operating room, have to expose her whereabouts to that dim, motionless figure standing by the door. If she were not quick enough, if she stumbled, if, when she reached the gallery, she could not open the window, then she would be caught, hopelessly cut off from all chance of escape. But it was her one slender hope.

Stealthily she slipped forward, easing herself around the wall to the stairs. For a moment the figure by the door stood immobile. Then it swung toward her. He had seen her. That knowledge sent all caution spinning. Crazily, making no effort to conceal herself, she dashed across the theater toward the small stairway.

Somehow she reached it. She was running upward. She was in the gallery, speeding down its narrow length to the window at the far end. Her pulses were drumming in her ears. There was the window, its pane shining faintly. It was shut. Her fingers felt for the catch; turned it, and tried to push up the sash. It did not move.

There was a creak on the stairs, and then footsteps on the wooden floor of the gallery coming toward her.

With the strength of despair she gave a last tug at the window. It opened, and the cool night air rushed in. Vaguely she could make out the spidery rails of the fire escape. She was through the window. Her feet were on the iron steps. She was running downward, downward....

Not once did she look back; nor did she pause until she caught sight of a heavy door, half open, with the light streaming through. She pushed it full open, to find herself in one of the main corridors. There were bright lights... people... safety. Shutting the door behind her, she swiftly shot the bolt.

Her mind was clear enough to realize that she should get in touch with Jim at once. Without giving a thought to her disheveled appearance she hurried to the nearest telephone. When at last she got through to her brother, at Headquarters, she poured out a broken account of her talk with Mrs. Broderick, her theory of the coffee, and everything that had happened subsequently. "I've got the piece of sugar, Jim," she concluded. "But the murderer knows I've got it. What am I to do?"

"Exactly as I say," Lieutenant Heath's tone was very stern. "Take the sugar to that fellow Peters for analysis right away."

"All right. But—but you're coming over, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'm coming imme-

dately. And it looks as if you've got something really important, Ro. Nice work." His voice was edged with anxiety as he added, "But for God's sake take care of yourself. Don't wander around the hospital alone. I'm not going to have my sister murdered to amuse anyone." He rang off.

The laboratory was in the farthest wing of the building. Rona hurried down the almost deserted corridors toward it, still feeling the vague dread of being pursued.

It was with relief that, as she went through the high archway which led to the wing, she saw ahead of her the tall, redheaded figure of Oliver Lord. She called, "Oliver!"

He spun round and hurried toward her. "What on earth's the matter, Rona? You look as if someone had been trying to murder you, too."

"They have," Rona said excitedly, "But I've done it, Oliver! I've proved that Dr. Knudsen wasn't killed by the coffee!"

"You—what?"

"I can't explain now. I've got to go to Peters in the analytical lab. Come with me."

They found Dr. Peters busily watching a beaker where a violet liquid was turning to brown above the flame of a Bunsen burner. Rona gave him the sugar, with her brother's instructions.

When they were out in the

passage again Oliver gripped her arm. "You're not crazy, by any chance . . . talking about sugar and analyses and . . .?"

"No, I'm not crazy." Breathlessly she told him everything. "So you see, Oliver," she concluded, "if we can prove it was the sugar that killed the Chief, anyone could have slipped it into his pocket at any time—anyone could have committed the crime."

"The little detective gal!" There was grim admiration in his eyes. "And you almost got yourself murdered trying to save me from the shadow of the death chair! That's the second very nice thing you've done for me today." His smile faded. "But something's crazy, Rona. If the murderer chased you to the operating room, how the hell did he know you were going there, or what you were planning to do?"

"He must have been listening when I talked to Mrs. Broderick." She told him how the door of the room across the passage had moved.

But Oliver was not paying much attention. Suddenly he said, "You told Mrs. Broderick everything, didn't you?"

Rona nodded.

"Then she knows as much as you do. And she's the only witness to the fact that she drank some of the coffee. If the murderer was listening he must have realized

that even if he had succeeded in killing you, he'd never have kept the truth from coming out unless—" His jaw very set, Oliver grabbed her arm. "Come on. We've got to get to her right away."

To Rona there was something unreal and dreamlike about that swift journey through corridors and up winding stairways to the Ives Wing. Neither she nor Oliver spoke. And yet she knew exactly what was in his mind, because she was thinking the same thing herself. She had left Mrs. Broderick alone in her room—Mrs. Broderick, who had it in her power not only to give the police a complete account of the murderer's blackmailing activities, but also to explode the cunning trick of the coffee.

She, Rona Heath, had almost been murdered, and she was only half as much of a menace to the murderer as the Director's wife. There was real danger for Caroline Broderick.

When at last they reached the Ives Wing they almost collided with Dr. Broderick coming down the passage from the direction of his wife's room.

Oliver asked sharply, "Have you been to see your wife? Is she all right?"

"All right?" A furrow of perplexity creased the Director's smooth forehead. "What do you mean? Yes, I—ah—did just put

my head around the door. But the lights were out. I called her name, but she seemed to be asleep. I did not disturb her."

While the Director stared in astonished silence, Rona hurried the short distance to Mrs. Broderick's room. She entered it. As Dr. Broderick had said, the room was in darkness. She could only just make out the dim figure on the bed. "Mrs. Broderick!" she whispered.

There was no reply.

Rona moved nearer the bed. A sudden, uncontrollable shiver passing through her, she turned to the bedside table, felt blindly for the light, and switched it on.

For one terrible moment she stared at the figure on the bed. Beneath the crumpled sheets, Caroline Broderick's body was sprawled limp and grotesque as a sawdust puppet. Her face was buried under a mound of pillows.

Rona stared at it, stared at its long white fingers, with their scarlet-nailed tips, tightly clenched. Then she screamed.

The next few minutes were a wild, fantastic kaleidoscope. The door behind her was thrown open. Someone was gripping her arm, steadyng her—Oliver. Vaguely she was conscious of another figure, Dr. Broderick, hurrying to the bed, bending over it, lifting the pillows. She caught a glimpse of his face.

There was no need to look

further. The truth cried out from the ashen whiteness of his cheeks and the horror in his eyes. Then, dimly, his voice came through to her: "Caroline! Good God! She's dead. She's—she's been smothered under her own pillows...."

For Rona the period that followed was merged into a blurred, timeless nightmare.

The figures of Dr. Broderick and Oliver seemed to loom at her side through a mist. There was a vague memory of her brother striding into that small, constricted room, instantly taking over control, hustling them all out into the passage. Policemen seemed suddenly to be everywhere.

Somehow she was giving replies to clipped, official questions. Then Jim's voice: "I'll want you again later, Rona. Go to the Director's office and wait for me."

For hours, it seemed, she was alone in that cold, impersonal room.

When at last the door swung open, it was not Lieutenant Heath but Oliver Lord who came in. The young surgeon crossed to where she stood by the window, taking both her cold hands in his. "Rona, this is ghastly. And to think that—that it almost happened to you, too!"

Rona asked, "You've been talking to Jim?"

"Yes. He's interviewed everyone—Ellsworth, me, Venner, even poor old Broderick." He gave a harsh laugh. "At least the field of suspicion has widened. No one has any sort of alibi for the time it happened. Any of us could have slipped into that room without being seen by the night nurse."

"And she was—was smothered?"

He nodded. "Easy to see how it happened. He managed to overhear your talk with Mrs. Broderick and went in as soon as you left the room. Mrs. Broderick wouldn't have been alarmed because, as she told you, she had no idea who the murderer of her brother was. It wouldn't have been difficult to smother her before she had a chance to suspect anything."

Rona gave a little shiver. "And—and as soon as he had killed her he went to the theater after me!"

"Sure." Oliver's lips tightened. "You were as dangerous to him as Caroline, because she'd told you everything she knew. If he'd been able to kill you, too, I guess it might never have come out about the blackmail or about the poisoned coffee being a plant or . . ."

"Or about the sugar!" put in Rona. "If only I hadn't had that crazy idea of going to get the sugar myself; if only I'd stayed

there with Mrs. Broderick, this would never have happened."

"You mustn't feel that way. You couldn't tell there was danger then." Oliver's hands slid to her arms, holding them tightly. "You went up to the operating room because—well, because you thought it would pull me out of a jam, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did." Rona smiled wanly; then her eyes clouded. "But you do think it will help, don't you? Now he knows the poisoned coffee was a frame-up, Jim can't suspect you any more. The hyoscine must have been in the sugar. That must have been the way Dr. Knudsen was killed, mustn't it?"

As she spoke, the door opened, and Lieutenant Heath swung into the room. His face was very grim. "You were talking about that half-lump of sugar," he said tersely. "Maybe you'll be interested to hear that Peters' analysis report has just come in."

Rona said, "It—it was poisoned?"

Lieutenant Heath gave a little shrug. "On the contrary. Peters says he found no trace of hyoscine."

"It wasn't poisoned? Then why . . .?"

"Don't expect me to answer any questions." Lieutenant Heath dropped into a chair and slung his leg over the arm. "I've put in a swell day. I had everything

pinned on Lord, then I find out that was exactly what the murderer wanted me to do. Although I had the entire motive handed me on a silver platter, I haven't been able to pin the blackmail on anyone. I let Mrs. Broderick get killed right under my nose. I let my own sister come within an ace of being murdered. I haven't even figured out yet how Knudsen was killed!"

He glanced at Oliver with a slightly sardonic smile. "Maybe, as a smart young doctor, you can tell me a couple of things. First thing: Why should the murderer have tried to kill Rona just because she went searching for a perfectly ordinary lump of sugar? Second thing: How the hell was Knudsen killed by hyoscine when neither the coffee he drank nor the sugar he ate had any hyoscine in it?"

While the lieutenant had been speaking, a furrow of concentration had puckered Oliver's forehead. Now he looked up, his eyes suddenly bright. "I may be cuckoo, but I think I can give you a very good answer to both those questions."

"Are you being funny?"

"This is hardly the time for light comedy." There was a strange excitement in the intern's voice. "I'd never dreamed of it until this instant, but at last I see something that looks like daylight. It's that half-lunip of

sugar. You say it wasn't poisoned; but the murderer tried to keep Rona from getting it. There can be only one explanation for that. And it makes the sugar vitally, horribly important."

Oliver swung round to Rona: "Don't you see what I mean? No, I guess you don't. But"—he turned back to the lieutenant—"with any luck I could prove I'm right if you'd let us go up to Knudsen's office."

Jim rose to his feet. "Okay," he said. "I'll bite. Let's go."

Oliver did not speak on the long, eerie trek to the operating room floor. He waited impatiently as Jim produced the key to the outside door of Knudsen's office and let them into the room. Once inside, however, the young surgeon became very brisk and businesslike. He nodded at the clothes closet in the corner. "That's where Knudsen kept the white coats he used on his hospital rounds, isn't it, Rona? Maybe your brother would let you search through the pockets and see what you can find."

Jim grunted, "Anything goes."

Bewildered but obedient, Rona went to the closet. She found a lump of sugar in each of the four white coats.

Oliver was smiling with grim satisfaction as she handed him the four pieces of sugar. "Excellent. We'll keep these as exhibits." He

tossed them onto the desk and moved to the drug cabinet, asking Jim to unlock it. As he tugged open the door, Rona saw that everything inside was just as it had been that afternoon when she had inspected it with Hugh Ellsworth—the rolls of adhesive, bandages, three hypodermic syringes, the stethoscope, iodine, adrenalin, morphine tablets, insulin ampules, alcohol, and digitalis.

"Now, if I'm right, I remember . . ." Oliver was scrutinizing the ranks of bottles and packages carefully. "Yes, there it is."

His fingers moved next to the hypodermic syringes lying on the bottom shelf. He picked one up, held it to the light, put it down, and took up another. Rona, watching at his elbow, saw that there were some remnants of colorless liquid inside. He placed it back in the cabinet and swung round to Jim.

"You said you thought the method used to poison Knudsen was the most important point in the case. You're right. It strikes me we're up against the most ingenious ruse I ever heard of in my life. And it's something not one in a thousand policemen could be expected to stumble on, because it rests entirely upon a little problem in medicine."

His frank, attractive face under the mop of red hair wore an expression of grim self-assurance.

He said, "I'm only a surgeon, Lieutenant, but I'm still fresh enough out of medical school to remember quite a bit of my medicine. I think if I give you a little lecture on 'Drugs and Their Uses,' you'll see what I'm driving at." His blue eyes glanced at Rona. "While I'm lecturing, there're a couple of things I'd like Rona to do for me. I'd prefer not to have her murderer doing them, so perhaps you've a nice, husky policeman you could send along with her, Lieutenant?"

Jim had been listening to him in uncommunicative silence. Still without commenting, he moved to the phone and gave rapid instructions. In a short time, a uniformed officer appeared.

"Okay. Now, here are the chores, Rona." Oliver took from the cabinet the hypodermic syringe which contained the dregs of liquid, and handed it to her. "Take this to Peters for analysis right away. Tell him to call me here the instant he starts getting an angle on the nature of its contents. Then rout out Venner, Ellsworth, and Dr. Broderick and tell them the lieutenant wants to talk to them up here—in a quarter of an hour."

Ten minutes later, her tasks fulfilled, Rona hurried back to Dr. Knudsen's office. Oliver and Jim were standing by the desk, staring down at the four lumps of sugar. The young surgeon still

looked excited and rather flushed. But there was a marked change in Jim. All traces of baffled indecision had left him. "Well, Rona," he said, "your boyfriend here is pretty smart, after all. Did you get his message to those three people?"

Rona nodded.

"Fine. I'm going to try a little experiment. And I've got a couple of chores for you before they get here." He nodded to Oliver, who took one of the remaining two hypodermic syringes from the closet and handed it to him. He, in his turn, passed it to Rona. "Go into the scrubroom and put a little water in this thing."

"Just about one c.c.," added Oliver.

Rona obeyed. When she brought the syringe back, Jim replaced it in its former position on the shelf of the cabinet, the door of which he left open.

"They should be here any minute now," he said. "All the doors to the theater are locked except the one leading through this office, Rona. I want you to wait outside in the passage and, when you see each person coming, tell him I want to talk to him in the theater. It doesn't matter who comes first, but it's your job to make sure each of them is alone when he goes through this office. Can you do that?"

"Of course; but why . . . ?"

"You'll know soon enough."

Jim glanced once again at Oliver. "Everything's set, isn't it?"

"Sure." Oliver grinned. "The trap and the cheese."

"Okay. Then come on."

The two men moved to the door leading through the scrubroom to the theater and disappeared. Rona, completely at sea, slipped out into the passage and moved to the head of the stairs by which the others would have to arrive.

In a very short time Hugh Ellsworth appeared, ascending the stairs.

She gave him the message and he strolled down the passage, disappearing through the door of Dr. Knudsen's office.

Gregory Venner came next, looking small and rather flustered. Rona sent him to the theater by the same route.

Finally Dr. Broderick himself appeared. The Director's face was still ashen-gray; he seemed to move in a daze. He acknowledged Rona's instructions by the slightest nod of his head and passed down the corridor.

After a brief interval Rona followed him. She found Dr. Knudsen's office empty and heard the sound of voices coming from the theater. She moved to join the others, but, as she did so, they all came trooping back into the office, led by Jim.

"I guess it's better to be in here," he said. "Please be seated."

Lieutenant Heath's alert gray eyes moved from Venier to Ellsworth, resting finally on Dr. Broderick. "I've asked you all to come here because I want you to know exactly where we stand. I'm sorry, Dr. Broderick, to have to include you at a time like this but . . ."

The Director waved the apology away. Very quietly he said, "You know there is nothing—nothing I would not do to have this terrible matter cleared up."

"I'm glad, Dr. Broderick, because I think it'll be cleared up very soon." Jim's lips were tight. "The whole setup of the two crimes is plain now, and a pretty dirty racket it's turned out to be. Someone here at the hospital had been extorting money out of Mrs. Broderick, using certain information about her daughter as a lever. Mrs. Broderick, herself, never knew that person's identity, but she confided in her brother, and Dr. Knudsen unearthed the black-mailer and threatened to expose him. He was murdered before he had a chance to do so."

He paused. "The murderer staked everything on the fact that the method he used for poisoning Dr. Knudsen would never come out. After the crime he put hyoscine in the remains of Knudsen's coffee, hoping to throw us off the right track and restrict suspicion to the people who had

access to the lunch tray. That not only gave him a perfect alibi, it might easily have kept the truth from ever coming out. Even at autopsy, Lord says, it would have been almost impossible to tell that the hyoscine had not been administered in the coffee Knudsen drank.

"Later in the evening," continued the lieutenant, "the murderer contrived to overhear a conversation between Rona and Mrs. Broderick. He learned that Mrs. Broderick had drunk some of the coffee. Since she had not been poisoned, both she and Rona were in a position to expose his poisoned-coffee ruse. He also learned that Rona had stumbled on the idea of the sugar which, although it wasn't poisoned, was a damning piece of evidence. For those two reasons, he had to kill Mrs. Broderick, and he tried to kill Rona."

Jim glanced at Oliver. "I'm going to admit that I expected the half-lump of sugar to be poisoned, and, when we discovered it wasn't, the method of death had me completely stopped. Lord here, however, got a theory. I want you medical men to hear it."

Oliver lit a cigarette. His strong hand, shielding the match, was very steady. "First of all," he said, "I want to ask a question. We were all pretty close to Knudsen. Did any of you either know or

suspect that he had anything the matter with him—a definite illness, I mean, that would require medication?"

Dr. Broderick looked up, his eyes showing surprise. Hugh Ellsworth, watching Oliver curiously, shook his head. It was Gregory Venner who spoke.

Emphatically he said, "But that's nonsense. Everyone knows that Knudsen was proud of the fact that he'd never had a day's illness in his life."

"I know he was proud of it," continued Oliver. "And it's logical to suppose that if ever he did have anything the matter with him, his pride would have made him terribly careful to keep anyone—even his closest associates—from guessing that he was ill. That, I believe, is exactly what happened. At the time of his death, and almost certainly for a considerable period before that, Dr. Knudsen was ill. And none of us ever so much as suspected it." He paused, adding very softly, "None of us, that is, except the man who murdered him."

A shade of Dr. Broderick's normal pompous manner returned as he leaned forward in his chair. "You appear to forget, Dr. Lord, that an autopsy has been performed. If Knudsen had been suffering, as you suggest, from some pathological condition, surely that would be revealed by the post-mortem findings."

"Not necessarily, sir. The condition I refer to, if properly treated, need show no visible signs either during life or at autopsy. And there seems no question that Dr. Knudsen, in spite of his contempt for internal medication, had been using a standard specific to control his disease."

The moment of unrelieved silence that followed was charged with tensity.

Oliver continued suddenly, "It was that half-lump of sugar which gave me the clue. It put sugar way up front as an issue that was important to the murderer."

He stubbed his cigarette. "Rona happened to see Knudsen nibbling that sugar just a short time before the operation this afternoon. On several occasions in the past, too, she had seen him nibbling sugar. He had explained to her that he did it to get quick energy. That didn't sound particularly convincing to me. Knudsen always had plenty of energy of his own, and, even if he had needed an extra fillip, he would surely not have nibbled the sugar; he would have eaten the whole lump. The more I thought about it, the more certain it seemed that there was only one sound reason why Knudsen carried sugar around with him."

He leaned across the desk, pushing forward the four lumps of sugar which Rona had taken from the dead surgeon's coats. "I was sure I had the right idea

when we found one of these in each of Knudsen's coats."

He glanced at Dr. Broderick. "It's not so long since I studied Diagnosis right here at the hospital. This problem turned out to be a lot easier than the ones we got in our year-end quiz. Dr. Knudsen was by no means overweight, but he confined himself to a diet that was low in carbohydrates; he took no sugar with his meals; and yet, apparently, he always carried with him a lump of sugar which he occasionally nibbled."

He broke off and, getting up, moved to the drug cabinet. He took a small box from the top shelf and laid it down on the desk. Sliding open the lid, he revealed two rubber-stoppered ampules. "Here, I think, is the clinching evidence. This particular drug is practically never used in surgery. I can remember no occasion upon which we've needed it in the past six months. And yet there is always a package of it in this cabinet, and this particular one has been more than half used. There's only one possible conclusion to draw. Dr. Knudsen must have been using it on himself."

Dr. Broderick had been staring at the little glass vials with growing astonishment. "Insulin!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly. The rest is elementary. A patient who eliminated

all sugar from his diet; a patient who took insulin; a patient who always carried a lump of sugar around with him." Oliver turned his keen gaze to Ellsworth. "Even a neurologist can figure out the answer to that one, can't he?"

Hugh Ellsworth was looking at him from impervious dark eyes. "I would say you've proved your point very ingeniously, Lord. You're implying of course, that Knudsen was a diabetic?"

"Sure. That's the secret he tried so hard to conceal and which he succeeded in keeping from everyone—except the man who murdered him. Dr. Knudsen had diabetes!"

Oliver Lord, very sure of himself now, had risen and was standing, tall and broad-shouldered, behind the desk. His gaze fixed Lieutenant Heath.

"I didn't have much time just now to give you the low-down on diabetes," he said. "In the first place, it's essential for all diabetics to take at least one injection of insulin a day. This keeps their blood sugar at the right level and prevents the danger of diabetic coma. But there is another danger, even after the insulin requirements of the individual have been thoroughly established. There is always the possibility of taking an overdose, which results in what is known as insulin shock. That's why every sensible diabetic carries a lump

of sugar or its equivalent with him at all times. If he ever gets an abnormal reaction to his injection, it is the routine thing for him to nibble at the sugar—which modifies the effect of the insulin."

He ran a hand through his thick red hair. "The whole set-up straightens itself out now, doesn't it? The man who had been extorting money from Mrs. Broderick knew Knudsen had diabetes." He turned to Ellsworth. "I don't know much about it, but I believe hyoscine is used almost exclusively in neurology, isn't it? Even so, it wouldn't have been difficult for any of us to get hold of some around the hospital. It is as colorless as insulin and just as easy to inject.

"And it wouldn't be difficult to take the rubber tops off some ampules and substitute a solution of hyoscine in place of the insulin. Once that was done, all the potential murderer had to do was to slip a poisoned ampule into Knudsen's current insulin supply."

He picked up the box. "As you see, this particular package has a slide top which opens only in one direction. That means that the patient would be more likely to use the ampules in the order they are in the box. Calculating on one ampule being used a day, it would have been possible for the murderer to plan ahead of time, almost the exact moment when death would take place."

He shrugged. "Rona saw the Chief nibbling that lump of sugar before the operation. Obviously he'd just taken what he thought was his regular shot of insulin. He'd felt something was wrong, suspected an overdose, and, like all other diabetics, immediately took sugar. It was a most diabolically ingenious way to commit murder. Dr. Knudsen was tricked into poisoning himself while his murderer, if he'd wanted to, could have been in Timbuktu at the time when the crime was supposed to have been committed."

"Thank you, Dr. Lord." Jim's voice broke in, instantly deflecting all attention away from the intern. The lieutenant's gray eyes were gauging the various expressions of the men in front of him. "You've heard Dr. Lord's theory. In a very short time I hope to have evidence to prove it's the correct one." He paused, adding very quietly, "It may also interest you to know that I already have evidence to prove that the murderer of Dr. Knudsen and Mrs. Broderick is sitting in this room right now."

Hugh Ellsworth propped his elbow on the back of the chair and stared straight ahead of him with slightly narrowed pupils; Gregory Venner clucked and threw a deprecatory glance at Dr. Broderick, who was gazing down at the polished black toes of his shoes.

"The murderer," continued Heath levelly, "has two very definite attributes. In the first place, he was familiar with Linette Clint's medical history, which had been kept a closely guarded secret. Ellsworth, as the doctor who treated her, obviously had all the facts in his possession. But he is not the only one who could have known about the false epilepsy diagnosis. Mr. Venner, as the official record keeper, would have had the chance to see all the case reports on Miss Clint, and Dr. Broderick, as the girl's stepfather, might easily have heard about it from his wife. Theoretically, at least, any one of those three people had the necessary knowledge to blackmail Mrs. Broderick."

He picked up a pencil and tapped with it on the top of the desk. "The second attribute, however, applies to the murderer and the murderer alone. Only one of you people knew Dr. Knudsen had diabetes. That made it possible for the murderer to commit the crime. It has also, however, made possible our solving it."

Beneath the short blond hair the detective's face was very hard and uncompromising. "It's easy to figure out what the murderer did this afternoon when he managed to slip into the office alone after Dr. Knudsen had died. He realized, of course, that his remote-control murder had been

successful. His one remaining job was to conceal the true method of death. He had in his possession some extra hyoscine. He saw the half-drunk coffee on the lunch tray and realized that by putting the hyoscine in it, he could provide the perfect smoke screen."

He went on: "Next, probably, he searched through the scrap-basket and got hold of the empty ampule which had contained the hyoscine dose. There was only one more thing for him to remove to make himself completely safe. The box of insulin ampules itself was no serious menace, but there was something else that was crucially important—the hypodermic syringe that Knudsen had used to give himself the poisoned injection.

"The murderer must have realized that Knudsen took the injection in a hurry before an important operation and probably would not have had the time to wash out the syringe. Almost certainly there would still be a residue in it—something which, if analyzed and proved to be hyoscine, would give the whole thing away. He had to remove it at all costs. But"—he shrugged—"there was the snag. Dr. Knudsen had put it back in its regular place in the drug cabinet, and the drug cabinet was locked. No one but Knudsen himself and Rona had a key. Knudsen's key was in his pocket—utterly inac-

cessible. Rona couldn't possibly be asked for hers without arousing suspicion. An elementary mischance like a locked cabinet had thrown a monkey-wrench into the perfect murder set-up.

"Not to have provided against that beforehand was the murderer's first big mistake. But it was nowhere near as fatal as his second mistake." He paused and added softly, "And I might add that this second mistake has been made within the last few minutes."

He let the pencil drop. "I can imagine how all through the past hours the thought of that hypodermic syringe must have been preying on his mind. A combination of panic and a guilty conscience had forced him into killing Mrs. Broderick and trying to kill Rona in a desperate attempt to save the 'perfect murder.' But what good did that do him, when all the time the syringe with its vital evidence was here in the drug cabinet? Some time this evening, we know, he was up here on this floor when he followed Rona. But at that time all the doors to this office were locked; there was a double barrier between him and the syringe."

Rona stiffened in her chair. She saw now exactly what her brother's little experiment had been.

"Just now," continued Lieutenant Heath, "each of you three

men came through this office alone on your way to join me in the theater. The drug cabinet was open; the syringe was lying there for anyone to see. It seemed to the murderer like a heaven-sent opportunity at last to destroy the one really clinching piece of evidence. He went to the closet . . . and took the syringe! Look!"

He rose and crossed to the drug cabinet, pointing at the lower shelf. All the others were staring fixedly. Rona looked, too, although she had realized exactly what she would see. The hypodermic syringe which Jim had made her partly fill with water was no longer there.

"You can see now," Lieutenant Heath said, "just what a fatal mistake that was. The murderer didn't realize that things were playing into his hands a little too easily; he didn't realize he had fallen into a very simple trap. He did exactly what I hoped he would do. At this moment he has that syringe in his pocket, and he might as well have a pair of handcuffs on his wrists too."

Oliver had risen now. He and Jim stood there by the cabinet, gazing fixedly at the three men in front of them. Hugh Ellsworth was still smiling his remote, faintly ironical smile. Dr. Broderick, very shaken and white,

was playing abstractedly with his watch chain. Gregory Venner, his

face a muddy gray, gave a little sniff and, thrusting his hand in his trouser pocket, pulled out a rolled-up handkerchief. With a swift, desperate movement he jabbed the handkerchief against his wrist.

"I wouldn't bother to try any tricky business with that syringe, Mr. Venner." Jim's voice came sharp as a whiplash. "I'm afraid there's nothing in it but water. The original syringe Knudsen used is down in the analytical laboratory being tested for hyoscine. It'll be the State's Exhibit A against you."

Gregory Venner stared back at him from eyes that showed naked panic. There was a hard clatter as the handkerchief dropped from his fingers. Slipping out from its folds, a hypodermic syringe rolled across the floor.

Like a flash Lieutenant Heath had sprung to pick it up.

"This was almost too easy, wasn't it?" he said. "The fact that you took that syringe from the cabinet just now is damning enough on its own. But there are plenty of other things, too. You were very careful to establish an alibi for the time before Dr. Knudsen's death, but both Dr. Lord and my sister saw you go into the office as soon as the operation was over. You had just about time to pour the hyoscine in the coffee and remove the empty ampule. Rona met you on

her way to Mrs. Broderick's room and told you Mrs. Broderick was going to give her some important information. I guess you were wondering just how much she did know. So you followed to the Ives Wing and did a bit of eavesdropping. You heard Rona talking about the sugar, which you knew might easily put us onto the track of the diabetes."

He continued relentlessly: "It was the diabetes that you really wanted to keep dark, wasn't it? Knudsen was your friend." His voice was edged with sarcasm. "You knew he'd never told his associates about it, but you had enough sense to realize that, if it did come out, suspicion would immediately point to you as the man who had gone mountain-climbing with him. Around the hospital Knudsen was successful in concealing the fact that he took insulin, but it's inconceivable that he could have spent days and nights camping out with you and still have kept the secret of his daily injections from you."

He paused. "Lord has just told me about that time when Knudsen collapsed and you trekked so gallantly down the mountain to get him medical aid. It's a thousand-to-one shot that Knudsen collapsed from diabetic coma because his insulin either ran out or was lost, and that the medical aid you brought was—fresh insulin."

The little anesthetist had been staring at him speechless, his face a blank, dazed mask. Now, in the deep silence, while every atom of concentration in the room was fixed on him, he rose pointlessly to his feet. He looked pathetically small and helpless. "I—I saved his life," he said dully.

"You saved his life once," agreed Jim quietly. "And Dr. Knudsen showed his gratitude by giving you an opportunity to restore the money you'd blackmailed out of his sister. You used that opportunity to take the life you had previously saved."

"They were all getting money out of Mrs. Broderick. They had so much . . . I had so little . . . I never dreamed it would come to . . ." Venner's voice trailed off. He looked around him wildly. Then suddenly he crumpled and fell to the floor.

They had taken him away.

For a while Rona was left alone in that austere, familiar room which had been the scene of so much tragedy and violence. She felt numb and tired.

At some later, indeterminate stage she was dimly aware that the door had opened. She looked up, to see the dark figure of Dr. Hugh Ellsworth.

"Well, Rona, we brought him around. When he heard Peters had found hyoscine in the hypodermic syringe, he confessed.

Rona shivered. "And they were friends! Poor little Venner, it seems incredible."

"It doesn't to me. People often get desperate when they grow old and feel their security slipping. He'd never felt his job was safe; he'd never had enough money; and he'd set his heart on going mountain-climbing in Switzerland. When he had a chance to read Linette's case history in the record-room, you can see what a temptation it must have been. A chance to get everything he wanted in life at a price Mrs. Broderick wouldn't even feel! And then Knudsen guessed, and accused him of the blackmail. Everything crashed—his new hopes and the few things he'd had to cling to in the past. He'd lost the respect of the one man who mattered to him; he'd lost the only influence which stood between him and Broderick's expressed intention of getting rid of him. There was nothing left to him except the money—and to preserve that he killed his best friend."

For a long moment they stood there without speaking. At length Ellsworth's lips moved in a slight smile. "Well, it's out of our hands now, and there's no use agonizing about it. At least, there's one piece of good news. Broderick's going to do everything in his power to put the grant through. That means a lot of expansion

in the Neurological Clinic. I'll have some real work for you there if you return."

As he spoke, the door from the scrubroom swung open and Oliver Lord came in. He crossed to Rona's side and put a possessive arm around her shoulders. Beneath the red hair his blue eyes stared belligerently at Ellsworth. "What's this about Rona going back to work for you?" he demanded. "She's staying on with me."

Ellsworth did not speak. The wry smile was still on his mouth

as he moved to the door. At the threshold he turned. "Rona will have to make up her own mind, of course. But, as a psychiatrist, I strongly advise the Neurological Clinic."

"Why?"

Ellsworth was grinning now. "Because I've always thought it is bad psychology for people to work together in the same department when they're—in love with each other."

He slipped out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.





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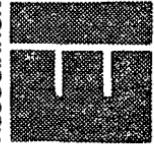
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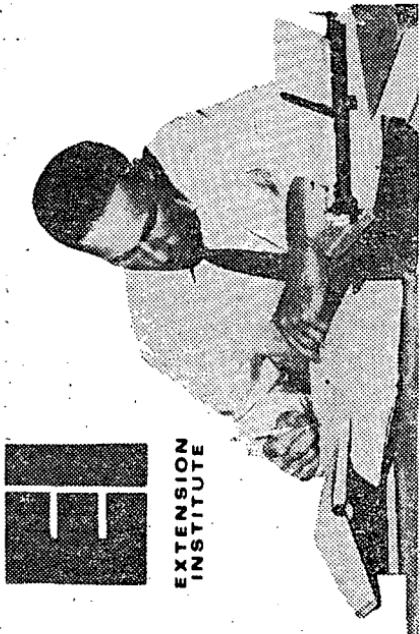
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# Lord Dunsany

## The Shop That Exchanged Evils

*A curious and haunting little mystery... Strangely enough, we cannot find any record of this story having been included in any Lord Dunsany book published in the United States—unless it was in some volume the very print of which has disappeared completely from every page extant...*

I OFTEN THINK OF THE BUREAU d'Exchange de Maux and the wondrously evil old man that sat therein. It stood in a little street in Paris, its doorway made of three brown beams of wood, the top one overlapping the others like the Greek letter *pai*, all the rest painted green, a house far lower and narrower than its neighbors and infinitely stranger, a place to take one's fancy. And over the doorway on the old brown beam in faded yellow letters this legend ran: *Bureau Universel d'Exchange de Maux.*

I entered at once and accosted the listless man who lolled on a stool by his counter. I demanded the wherefore of his wonderful shop, what evil wares he exchanged, and many other things I wished to know, for curiosity led me; and indeed had it not, I would have gone at once from the shop, for there was so evil a look in that fatted man, in

the hang of his fallen cheeks and his sinful eye, that you would have said he had had dealings with Hell and won the advantage by sheer wickedness.

Such a man was the shopkeeper, but above all, the evil of him lay in his eyes, which lay so still, so apathetic, that you would have sworn he was drugged or dead; like lizards motionless on a wall they lay, then suddenly they darted, and all his cunning flamed up and revealed itself in what one moment before seemed no more than a sleepy and ordinary wicked old man. And this was the object and trade of that peculiar shop: you paid twenty francs, which the old man proceeded to take from me, for admission to the shop, and then had the right to exchange any evil or misfortune of your own for some evil or misfortune that anyone on the premises "could afford," as the old man put it.

There were four men in the dingy ends of that low-ceilinged room who gesticulated and muttered softly in twos as men who make a bargain, and now and then more came in, and the eyes of the flabby owner of the shop leaped up at them as they entered, seemed to know their errands at once and each one's peculiar need, and fell back again into somnolence, receiving his twenty francs in an almost lifeless hand and biting the coin as though in pure absence of mind.

"Some of my clients," he told me. So amazing to me was the trade of this extraordinary shop that I engaged the old man in conversation, repulsive though he was, and from his garrulity I gathered these facts. He spoke in perfect English though his utterance was somewhat thick and heavy. He had been in business a great many years—how many he would not say—and was far older than he looked. All kinds of people did business in his shop. What they exchanged with each other he did not care, except that it had to be evils; he was not empowered to carry on any other kind of business.

There was no evil, he told me, that was not negotiable there; no evil the old man knew had ever been taken away in despair from his shop. A man might have to wait and come back again next day and next and the day after,

paying twenty francs each time, but the old man had the addresses of his clients and shrewdly knew their needs, and soon the right two met and eagerly changed their commodities. "Commodities" was the old man's terrible word, said with a gruesome smack of his heavy lips, and evils to him were goods.

I learned from him in ten minutes very much of human nature, more than I had ever learned from any other man; I learned from him that a man's own evil is to him the worst thing that there is or could be, and that an evil so unbalances all men's minds that they always seek for extremes in that small grim shop. A woman who had no children had exchanged with an impoverished half-maddened creature with twelve. On one occasion a man had exchanged wisdom for folly.

"Why on earth did he do that?" I said.

"None of my business," the old man answered in his heavy, indolent way. He merely took his twenty francs from each and ratified the agreement in the little room at the back of the shop where his clients conducted their business. Apparently the man who had parted with wisdom had left the shop on the tips of his toes with a happy though foolish expression all over his face, but the other went thoughtfully away.

wearing a troubled look. Almost always it seemed they did business in opposite evils.

But the thing that puzzled me most in all my talks with that unwieldy man, the thing that puzzles me still, is that none that had once done business in that shop ever returned again; a man might come day after day for many weeks, but once he did business he never returned; so much the old man told me, but, when I asked him why, he only muttered that he did not know.

It was to discover the wherefore of this strange thing, and for no other reason at all, that I determined myself to do business in the little room at the back of that mysterious shop. I determined to exchange some trivial evil for some evil equally slight, to seek for myself an advantage so very small as scarcely to give Fate as it were a grip; for I deeply distrusted these bargains, knowing well that man has never yet benefited by the marvelous, and that the more miraculous his advantage appears to be, the more securely and tightly do the gods or the witches catch him.

In a few days more I was going back to England and I was beginning to fear that I should be seasick: this fear of seasickness—not the actual malady but only the fear of it—I decided to exchange for a suitably little evil. I did not know with

whom I should be dealing, who in reality was the head of the firm, but I decided that not even the Devil could make very much on so small a bargain as that.

I told the old man of my project, and he scoffed at the smallness of my commodity; trying to urge me on to some darker bargain; but he could not move me from my purpose. And then he told me, with a somewhat boastful air, tales of the big business, the great bargains, that had passed through his hands. A man had once run in there to try and exchange death; he had swallowed poison by accident and had only a few hours to live. That sinister old man had been able to oblige him. A client was willing to barter even that commodity.

"But what did he give in exchange for death?" I said.

"Life," said that grim old man with a furtive chuckle.

"It must have been a horrible life," I said.

"That was not my affair," said the proprietor.

Strange business, I watched in that shop for the next few days, the exchange of odd commodities, and heard strange mutterings in corners among couples who presently rose and went to the back room, the old man following.

Twice a day for a week I paid my twenty francs, watching life with its great needs and its little'

needs spread out before me in all its wonderful variety.

And one day I met a comfortable man with only a little need; he seemed to have the very evil I wanted. He always feared the elevator was going to break down. I knew too much of hydraulics to fear things as silly as that, but it was not my business to cure his ridiculous fear.

Few words were needed to convince him that mine was the very evil for him—he never crossed the sea, and I, on the other hand, could always walk upstairs—and I also felt at the time, as many must feel in that shop, that so absurd a fear could never trouble me.

When we both had signed the parchment in the spidery back room and the old man had ratified (for which we had to pay him fifty francs each), I went back to my hotel, and there I saw the deadly thing in the basement. They asked me if I would go upstairs in the elevator; from force of habit I risked it, and I held my breath all the way up and clenched my hands.

Nothing will induce me to try such a journey again. I would sooner go up to my room in a balloon. And why? Because if a balloon goes wrong you have a chance—it may spread out into a parachute after it has burst, it may catch in a tree, or a hundred and one things may happen;

but if the elevator falls down its shaft, you are done. As for seasickness, I shall never be seasick again—I cannot tell you why except I know it is so.

And the shop in which I made this remarkable bargain, the shop to which none return when their business is done; I set out for it next day. Blindfold I could have found my way to the unfashionable quarter in which the mean street runs, where you take the alley at the end, whence runs the cul-de-sac where the queer shop stood. A shop with pillars, fluted and painted red, stands on one side; its other neighbor is a low-class jeweler's with little silver brooches in the window. In such incongruous company stood the shop with the three brown beams of wood and all the rest of it painted green.

In half an hour I stood in the cul-de-sac to which I had gone twice a day for the last week. I found the shop with the ugly painted pillars and the jeweler who sold brooches; but the green house with the three brown beams was gone.

Pulled down, you will say, although in a single night? That can never be the answer to the mystery, for the shop of the fluted pillars painted red, and the low-class jeweler's shop with its silver brooches (all of which I could identify one by one) were standing side by side.

# **Charlotte Armstrong**

## **Protector of Travelers**

*The late Charlotte Armstrong (and oh, how she is missed!) had qualities that appealed to nearly every type of reader: she could write the purely "intellectual" detective story, and she was equally proficient with the more "sensational" mystery techniques.*

*The characters in Charlotte Armstrong's stories are always readily identifiable as human beings that "feel"—so that, whether her stories are intellectual or sensational, they are packed with emotion; and the action, the sequence of events and their impact, never fail to rivet attention . . .*

*In "Protector of Travelers" it all started simply enough: Toby and Ann Hartman decided to go to a lovely deserted Mexican beach for a week-end of fishing, and they took with them a friend of Toby's—well, he really wasn't a friend. What happened after that has become almost a legend, almost folklore . . .*

**S**HE CRAWLED OUT OF HER sleeping bag and from under the half tent they had rigged to keep the sand from blowing into their faces—and also, Ann thought, to provide at least a token privacy.

She didn't much like having a third person along—this man from Toby's office, whom she barely knew. She had no reason to dislike him—not really. He was just an amiable man who liked fishing. He performed his share of the chores, cheerfully, and he behaved very well. But. It would have been so much more fun to have slept out of doors and

awakened this long week-end on this lovely deserted Mexican beach; just the two of them, Toby and Ann Hartman, a man and his wife.

We can't really play or have fun, she thought resentfully; we can't act as young and silly as we still know how to be. This third person, Byron Reynolds, was a kind of anchor to their upper-middle-class-American civilization; he was a drag on their spirits.

Toby had said, "Look, honey, he wants to come with us so bad. He's older than we are, and I don't think he goes fishing much

any more. But he won't be any bother. Do you mind?"

"If he's willing to leave at midnight," she had said, "and drive all night, the way we're going to do."

"He's willing and eager. He's got to be at this stupid Company dinner, too. So you can pick us both up, downtown. He'll bring his stuff over here the night before, and we'll just light out, the way we planned. It's kind of wild, down there," Toby had added. "Another man along might not be such a bad idea."

So Ann had agreed. She was no outdoor girl, except as Toby's devoted pupil and follower. There could be crises that she was not prepared to meet. Maybe, she had thought, it isn't such a bad idea.

Now, she thought, it was a bad idea and Toby knows it, too. Oh, well; they were stuck with it.

Toby was a tuft of brown beloved hair in the shadow. Byron Reynolds was a motionless lump in a tan sleeping bag, over there. Meanwhile, here was Ann, the only soul awake in this dawn which was beautiful enough to make you bawl, if you didn't watch out.

Ann stretched her body in the heavy knit pants and top that she wore night and day, which was, in the circumstances, more decent than otherwise. What now? she asked herself, knowing that she couldn't bear this wild beauty for

very long at a time. She would remember it forever, of course. But now—make up a fire? Put the coffee on?

The coffee can was on the tailboard of their station wagon, parked farther up the beach, on the margin where some tough grass grew. She stripped off the socks she had worn to bed and felt the cold sand lump under her insteps and slip and slide away. One more hot shining day. One more cold pale night. One more dawn. She kept her head down and filled the coffee pot from the water barrel, dumped the coffee in, and began to slog across the sand to where they had made a fire place.

Toby was up and stretching.  
"Early bird," she yelled.

"Good morning, worm," he yelled back, grinning. Ann had never been a dawn fancier. Oh, she was going to be kidded when they got home.

She struggled toward the circle of stones, carefully not looking at the tan sleeping bag that was beside her path, expecting Byron Reynolds to sit up and greet her. But he did not stir when she passed, and Ann was glad.

She was arranging the little sticks and the big sticks, kneeling on the chilly sand, anticipating the dear sharp heat, absorbed, and at the moment rather blissfully happy, when Toby touched her.

She smiled up. "Hi."

"Look; Annie." He squatted beside her. "Something's kind of wrong, I'm afraid."

"What?"

"Trouble." His eyes sent the trouble straight into hers. "I think," her husband said, "Byron must have passed out in the night. He seems to be dead, Annie."

Ann panicked. There was nothing else to call it—she just panicked.

They sat on the sand, several yards away from the body. It was a body. There was no doubt at all about that.

Ann said, "Toby, I *can't*. I just can't. I know I'm panicking, but I'm going to have to walk right out on this. Y-y-you've—" her teeth chattered—"heard stories about Mexican jails. What if they don't believe us? And I don't see why they should. I mean, we're Americans. I've read about Americans who have just a little traffic accident down here and who can't get a lawyer or even find out why they're being held. They can't even get a doctor. They just lie in their blood in some dirty jail. And we don't know anybody. We can't even speak the language. We might not even be able to get in touch with anybody in the United States. Toby, I'm scared—plain scared!"

His eyes winced.

"They say it takes money, lots of money," she babbled on. "B-

bribes, and all that. Listen, I don't know if what they say is true or not, but that's what I've read in the newspapers. And what if we were locked up, not knowing how to *ever* get out, and not being together? I would go out of my mind, Toby, right straight up the wall. I'm sorry, honey—you married a coward. But I'd better not kid either one of us. I'm absolutely terrified!"

Toby's face was somber. "Yeah," he said. "Me, too."

Then there was no sound but the surf. A few gulls wheeled by. The sun was up now, full gold. Not another soul had appeared on the horizon. Yet.

"Wh-what h-happened to him?" she chattered.

"I don't know. When I looked over there I just knew something was wrong."

He shrugged in despair. "You could take the station wagon, Ann."

"No! I won't leave you," she wailed. "I can't do that, *either*."

"Honey, if you could get across, into San Diego, you'd be able to stir people up—in case there *was* trouble."

"What can Americans do in this country, to protect us?"

"Something, I guess," he answered gloomily. "I'll admit I am only guessing."

"Toby, we don't even *know* the laws down here. They're not going to be like ours. For us, there

would have to be an autopsy—to prove what did happen. But do they have a law like that? And if they do hold the—I mean, him—oh, poor Mrs. Reynolds! Could we at least find a telephone and call somebody on the other side of the border before we... Could we get a lawyer to find us a lawyer down here? Maybe I wouldn't be so scared."

Toby looked at her shuddering wretchedness and said abruptly, "Let's go. Start packing the stuff. Just take it easy, but *do* it." His arm was tight around her shoulders. Ann's heart was racing. "Now, don't worry," Toby said grimly. "We're not going to leave him."

"We couldn't do that, *either*," cried Ann.

"He's an American, too," said Toby. "So we'll go home, all of us."

Ann sat beside him as he drove north, proceeding very carefully, very soberly, and heavy, heavy over their heads hung the body of Byron Reynolds, swathed in both tent canvasses, stretched between fishing rods, disguised beside the rolled-up sleeping bags on the roof of the station wagon, along the ski rack.

Toby had done all the bad part of the packing. He said that a body in a sleeping bag looked too much like a body. He thought

the roof would be safer. It would look as if they had a large tent up there.

Inside the station wagon was all their other gear—suitcases, camp icebox, water barrel, utensils, and their food supplies. Bathing suits flapped at one window. Near another hung the clear plastic bags with their civilized costumes inside of them—Ann's green silk suit, in case they had gone to dinner somewhere although she wasn't fond of foreign food, and ridiculously, in the other two plastic bags, the dress suits the two men had worn to the Company dinner that now seemed long, long ago, in another world.

Ann was bracing herself for the border inspection. She began to believe that they would get that far without any trouble. She knew the routine there: The check was usually perfunctory—unless something aroused the well-trained but mysterious instincts of the men who would or would not let them through. The Mexicans would probably just wave them by—it was the Americans who would check. But they had to get past both. Or be caught in some No Man's Land between? Ann trembled.

You are, she told herself, a fun-loving young American wife, dirty but happy, and glad to be getting home to your own tiled bathroom. Toby is a sports-loving

young American husband who didn't catch any fish to speak of, but who enjoyed trying. We wish everybody well and we expect to be wished well in return. And there are just the two of us. Keep remembering that—there are just the two of us.

Her hands were moist. But if the Inspectors looked hard enough to notice there are two dinner jackets and all the trimmings in two of the transparent garment bags... Her hands slipped around each other. Few men took even one on a fishing trip. No one man took two. But she wouldn't mention this to Toby. Too late to do anything about it now.

Toby said, "If you keep on looking the way you do, Annie, we would do better to stop at the Police Station on this side, before we make more trouble for ourselves."

"I know," she said. "I won't... I'll be all right."

"Think about something else."

"All right."

There was a St. Christopher Medal magnetized to the dashboard. Ann Hartman said to it, silently, "Protector of Travelers, tell me what to think about and what to do with my hands."

They were coming into Tijuana, somnolent at this hour. Toby's hands looked normal on the wheel. I am a girl, Ann suddenly

thought. She took up her handbag and got out her compact and lipstick. They trundled quietly through the town while she dabbed at her face.

All the while, in countercurrent, her thoughts ran to Mrs Reynolds, the widowed woman. What will there be to comfort her? There will be me, to say that he was happy yesterday. Will she believe me? Do I believe me? I never took the trouble to know the man, or to know if he was happy.

Now they were in the plaza leading to the border. There was no traffic; there would be no delay. Ann slipped the blue scarf off her head and shook out her hair. The station wagon came demurely to a stop and the Mexicans on duty waved it on.

Now the gate to the United States of America. Ann put the scarf on her head and crossed the ends under her chin. When it was her turn to lean forward, to look past Toby at the big American and tell where she was born, she was holding the scarf's ends taut in her hands, and she managed to achieve her normal air of semi-mischiefous query. And how do you know I'm not a spy or a smuggler?

She must have done it perfectly. The Inspector was not amused by this girlish attitude. He saw it often and was never amused, by people who did not really

believe in crime or have any notion what his job was. With a stony face he waved the station wagon through.

It seemed to Ann as if she could feel the Bill of Rights settling cosily down all around them. She sighed her relief. The people of the United States were up and about on their way to work. There was traffic.

Toby drove on, as carefully and as rigidly as before. Then Ann saw a great drop of perspiration spring out of his hair line and start down toward his brow. She whipped off her scarf and gently blotted it away.

Toby sighed, "So far, so good."

So far? But aren't we home, she thought. Where we understand and will be understood.

Some miles farther, he suddenly turned the wheel, with his right leg convulsing oddly, and the station wagon bumped into a dusty parking lot at the side of a small diner. Toby managed to set the brake, then he tumbled out on his side, putting his right foot to the ground and massaging the calf. Ann got out and ran around to him.

"Cramp. Oo-ow. And a doosy, too. Tension, I guess."

"I can drive."

He glanced upward. "No, no. Look, why don't we get some coffee?" He was looking rather fiercely reckless. "We've got some

figuring to do, anyhow."

What figuring? she wondered. But he began to limp toward the diner and she followed.

When they were inside, the pain took hold of him and a woman, evidently the proprietress, rolled nervous eyes. "Just a cramp," Toby reassured her. "Can we get some breakfast?"

"Why, sure thing." She led them to a booth in the rear which was dim and smelled of yesterday's potatoes.

But the coffee was marvelous.

"What now?" said Toby after a while, when the pain creases had gone from his face.

"I thought—" Ann didn't finish. She realized that she hadn't been thinking. When Toby had said home, she had imagined he meant their home town.

He read her mind. "Uh uh. Not two hundred more miles—not the way we're loaded." (No, of course not.) "I think San Diego," he went on. "And someone in authority, you know?"

He meant the police. Ann nodded.

"But what about his wife? Ann, what would *you* want?"

Ann tried to turn a sympathetic imagination toward an answer. She could dimly remember how Ethel Reynolds looked—middle-aged spread, pink jowls, twists of pale hair. Poor woman—Ann did not really know her, knew nothing about her temperament. "I think,"

she finally answered, "that she will be glad we have done what we've done."

"Should we call her? Right away?"

Ann said, "I guess we should."

Toby leaned out of the booth, massaging his leg where it was stretched out into the aisle. "Not much privacy here. Phone's on the wall."

"Not here, then. One of those outdoor booths?"

"Okay. See, I can't figure what to do with the—the package."

"But won't the—the authorities . . .?"

"Yes, but do we drive up with it? To a police station? Or to some hospital?"

"I don't see—"

"Or would she want—a regular place?"

The conversation was awkward, when they could not speak aloud about a dead body or a funeral parlor.

"We should ask *her* that," Ann said.

Toby sighed, "One more cup."

Ann studied the plane of his cheek, the touch of gauntness. She was beginning to think that she was a girl; and a stupid one, at that. She not only didn't know the answers, she didn't know the questions.

Except one. "What will happen to us?" she asked softly.

"I don't know." Their eyes met. "Wish I could keep you out of

it," Toby said. "It wasn't your decision."

"It was my necessity, Toby." Ann was woman enough and bright enough to know that much. "Did we break a law?"

"We don't know," Toby said, "but ignorance is no excuse. Well, we'd better get going."

At the cash register the proprietress inquired about his leg and Toby said it seemed to be functioning properly now. He left the money and the Hartmans went outside.

The station wagon was not where they had left it.

It was not in the parking lot at all.

It was gone.

Toby's hand was painful on Ann's shoulder. They whirled and went back inside. "Did you see anybody drive off with my gray station wagon?" he demanded.

"What? What's that?" When the meaning of the question finally got through to the woman's understanding, she became agitated. So did one of the customers of the place, a barrel-chested man in working clothes, with a disreputable felt hat pulled to a pixie peak on his head.

"Hey, I saw a gray station wagon, backing out. Didn't know it was yours, Mister. I wasn't here when you parked it. Hey, you better call the cops right away.

They're pretty sharp, you know. They'll get right on it."

Now the proprietress was pointing to the phone on the wall. "That's right. You do that, Mister."

The Hartmans realized that they could not *not* do that.

Toby gave Ann a look, then went to the phone, with the proprietress beside him, holding a dime ready, helpful, insistent, full of faith in the power of the police to protect the innocent. They were just within the city limits. So Toby called the San Diego police:

Ann stood there, paralysed. What would Toby say? What could he say?

Very quietly, steadily, he reported a stolen car. He gave the location of the diner, prompted by the proprietress. He described the station wagon, gave the license number, said that it was loaded with camping equipment. He gave their names and their home address in Santa Barbara. Finally, he said, "We'll try to get into town and find a hotel. I'll call you back from there." He thanked somebody and hung up.

He had not mentioned a dead body—but he looked ghastly.

The customer was dancing up and down on his pointed shoes. "Hey, listen, folks, I'm going into town. You can ride along with me. You're perfectly welcome. Okay?"

"That's mighty nice of you," Toby said tiredly.

So they went outside, and Toby and Ann got into the back seat of an old Ford. The man coaxed it into motion and told them his name was Donahue, that he was a plasterer. It was a crime there was so much crime these days. It was these punk kids. Now that he came to think about it, he was pretty sure that a couple of kids had taken the wagon. Now, he didn't know exactly why he thought so. Skinny legs in tight jeans—he remembered that much. Memory was a funny thing, wasn't it? And so on and so on.

Ann could not speak and Toby spoke as little as possible. He gave Donahue the name of a hotel. On arrival, Toby thanked him and said, yes they had his name and address, as a witness.

Mr. Donahue, rolling his eyes at the great canopy over the sidewalk, began to backtrack. "Say, folks, listen, I don't think I could identify nobody. Not really. I just got this impression, you know what I mean? It's not going to be too much help, you know what I mean? Look, I'll do my duty and all, but I wasn't paying *that* much attention."

"We understand," Ann said to him. Mr. Donahue gave her a look of sadness and drove away.

So Toby, in his old flannel shirt and dirty suntans, and Ann, in her rumpled suit of slacks and

soiled shirt, walked past the doorman into the dim and elegant old lobby. But Toby had stayed here many times before, and when the manager came out, Toby gave him a quiet explanation that went no further than "fishing trip, stolen car and luggage." The manager allowed the stern look on his face to dissolve toward service and personally led them to their room.

As soon as he was gone, Ann threw herself down on the lush mattress. Toby said quickly, warningly, "We probably are in no more trouble than we already were, Annie. Go wash up, why don't you? I'm going to call Ethel Reynolds. Then we'll trot around to the police station."

"Yes," said Ann calmly. She went into the luxurious bathroom and put her hands into hot water. She washed her face and neck and she combed her hair. She tugged at her shapeless garments and held her body so that the slacks and shirt fell into smarter lines. She was feeling stunned by everything that was happening, including the fact that her husband had obviously expected her to have a girlish cry.

When she came back into the room, Toby said, "I've decided to call her from the station. She'll probably want to talk to them too."

"It would be bad enough to have to tell her if we knew her," Ann said.

"Or worse," he said.

They took a cab. Toby had not been able to shave, since everything was in the suitcases in the station wagon; but he had washed and neatened his hair.

They entered the Headquarters building and asked where to report the theft of a body. They endured, with what calm they could muster, a series of hard-eyed stares, and at last found themselves in an office with a man in a gray suit who told them his name was Larson.

Toby told the story, sparing nothing. At the end, before the man could comment, Toby added quickly, "Now, I ought to call his wife. I really ought. I've chickened out on that long enough."

Larson nodded and pushed a phone toward Toby.

Ann sat in a chair and clasped her hands, thinking, I can't seem to help at all. I can't do any of these awful things. Toby has to do them. If it wasn't for me, he'd have got in touch with the Mexican police. And who knows? It might have turned out all right. Who knows?

She listened to Toby struggling to tell a woman gently that her husband was suddenly and mysteriously dead, that his body had been smuggled across the border, and then stolen. The poor woman must have said that she didn't understand, because Toby,

with almost superhuman patience, began to go all through it again.

After that, Toby looked at Larson with such despair that the detective extended his hand for the phone. He went through it the third time, in a somewhat less hesitant manner.

When, at last, the connection was broken, the understanding was that Ethel Reynolds would come to San Diego at once. The Hartmans were to reserve a hotel room for her and wait for her.

Now Toby sat, exhausted, while Larson used the phone again. After a brief mention of a dead man he went through a series of "I see," "Okay," and "Right." Then he put down the phone and faced them.

"Your car has been found," he told them watchfully.

"Oh." Ann rose. At least, this was a little better.

"There is no dead body on the roof of your station wagon," Larson said quietly.

Toby and Ann simply stared at him.

"We had better go," the police officer said. "Come with me."

So they rode, with Larson, in a dark sedan, out of the city and back along the road by which they had entered San Diego. They soon stopped asking questions to which there were no answers.

The station wagon was parked about a mile past the diner. It

was cluttered and dusty, with the canvas of one of the half tents hanging down over the side. The fishing rods were still there, and one of the sleeping bags was on the roof.

But there was no body.

Not in the station wagon or on top of it.

A police car was there, and uniformed men greeted Larson with deference. They had spotted the station wagon by its description and the license number. There it had stood—but no prints, no clues. Nothing for the police to work on.

Ann and Toby were standing on the sidewalk, hand in hand. Larson beckoned. "See what else is missing," he suggested.

Toby said, "One of the canvases from the roof, and two sleeping bags. And—you know—"

"Anything else, is what I'm asking," snapped Larson.

So Toby put his head in over the lowered tailgate. "Hard to say... Nothing, as far as I can tell."

Ann slipped under his arm to look in. Her green silk suit gleamed dimly inside its plastic bag. "Could we please take our clothes?" she asked Larson. "We haven't got a stitch to change into."

"Lift those suitcases out."

Toby lifted them out, his tan leather and her blue nylon. He

did not touch Reynolds' black bag.

"Open them," said Larson.

Toby opened them on the tailboard. Ann's pink slip, her high heels, the old skirt and sweater she had jammed in, were exposed. Larson stirred the contents of both cases with a hand he used as if it were a stick. "All right," he said, "take them, but nothing else. In view of your story about this dead man, we'll have to impound the car."

He left them and seemed to be giving instructions.

Ann, standing on the sidewalk, began to cry. Very silently, not to disturb anybody; she let the tears roll down. It seemed so sad that a man should have died and been treated with such indignity as to have been lost, like an old shoe, the one old shoe that lies beside the road, so mysteriously, with the shape of a living foot still in it.

Larson came back, gave her tears a hard look that dried them instantly, herded the Hartmans into his sedan, and drove them back to the hotel. He went up to the room with them. In the incongruous elegance they all sat down.

Larson said, "Maybe they had a notion to go camping. They wired across your ignition and took off. They start to look over the loot, and find the dead man. They realize they've got a hot

car. Abandon it. But there are people who are superstitiously unwilling to handle a dead body. So the body will turn up somewhere else—in some out-of-the-way spot."

Larson shrugged. "They couldn't have gone too far before they started to unload, that's for sure. So we'll look around and we'll find it. That is if—"

He became bland. "Now, this Byron Reynolds was a business associate of yours, you say, Mr. Hartman?"

"I said we worked in the same office."

"How well did you know him?"

"Not too well. Nice fellow, but older than I am. Went to lunch a few times. Very casually. Never entertained him and his wife socially. Ann—I mean, Mrs. Hartman—barely knew them."

"How much did you know Mr. Reynolds, Mrs. Hartman?" The detective's eyes were cold.

"I'd met him and his wife at the Company parties, only once or twice," she said.

"He was—did you say, in his early forties? Did you ever meet him anywhere alone? Mrs. Hartman?"

"What?" said Ann, not understanding until Toby drew air in, sharply.

"I ask the questions," Larson said, "that I have to ask. Any trouble between you and Reynolds in a business way, Hartman?"

Rivalry? Grudges? Office politics?"

"No," said Toby shortly. "He liked to fish. He wanted to go in the worst way, so I felt sorry for him. And that's all there was to it. What are *you* thinking? There'll be an autopsy, won't there?"

"Not without a body," Larson reminded them.

"You'll find it."

"We'll do our best—and that's pretty good, don't forget it." Larson seemed to be giving them warning. "If we don't, I may have to do a little more wondering. Now, you say you came over the border with a body on the roof of your car. Suppose you didn't? Suppose the man died down there in Mexico and his death could be, shall we say, embarrassing to you? So you bury him in the sand. Or somewhere. Then you panic. Run. Now, you are home free. Why? Because we can look for the body on this side as long as we like, but we can't find what isn't there. Can we?"

Toby said sharply, "We stole our own car? Ask the woman in the diner. Ask Mr. Donahue."

"I don't say you stole your own car," said Larson calmly. "I just wonder if, given the fact that it just *happened* to get stolen, you didn't very cleverly improvise a little?"

"That's pretty wild," said Toby stiffly.

"It would be a coincidence?" Larson grinned at them. "It already is. And so is everything else you've told me. No, it looks as if you bury him and run and get away with it. But where is he? People are going to want to know. Pretty smart if we look for him here instead of where he really is."

"You flatter us," said Toby, with bitter anger.

"I kind of hope we'll find that body pretty soon," Larson said. "Time doesn't help any of us, very much. Meanwhile, we'll be checking." And he left abruptly.

Toby turned around, looking wild. "Now what? Now he is going to be checking on us, up home. Now come all the nasty questions. All over the office. All over the neighborhood. Among our friends. Questions about me. Questions about you."

"I know," Ann said. She thought that no matter what the answers are, the questions alone are going to be a mark on us, forever. "Well," she said brightly, "maybe the sky is falling, but this chicken-little is going to have a bath, and you had better take one, too. Then we'll go down and have a super-civilized luncheon with all the fixings."

"While we can, eh?" Toby was trying as hard as she to grin and be gay.

So they tried. But they were

not as young as they had been yesterday, and any playfulness was much too close to hysteria. Ann, in the old sweater and skirt, felt like the proverbial condemned criminal.

They were paged. Santa Barbara calling. Mrs. Reynolds was prostrated and under a doctor's care. Her lawyer, a Mr. Bixler, was on his way and would the Hartmans please put the hotel room in his name? The Hartmans did.

Toby bought a large scale map of the city. They went up to the room where he pored over it and Ann stared at the wall.

"Listen, Annie, I've been figuring the times involved. Do you realize that this thief or thieves had the car for only about one hour, maybe less? The body has to be near that diner."

"That's what Mr. Larson was saying, isn't it? But you can drive an awful long way in one hour."

"Not and get back to a mile from where you started."

"You can drive pretty far in even half an hour."

"I don't think he did."

"Why not?"

"Well, look at it this way. Suppose he drove half an hour as far as he could go? Why the devil would he turn around and come back at all? Why not leave the car half an hour out?"

"Oh," she said.

"Look where it was found,

About a mile the *other side* of the diner."

"So?"

"So I say he first took it the other way—*this* side of the diner. Donahue didn't see which way he drove off. Now, figure that the thief panics. He has to get rid of the car. He doesn't leave it where it is. Now, don't tell me he drove it about a mile, stopped on a busy thoroughfare, and removed a body there."

"No."

"Then he wanted to get it away from the place where he *first* took it. So he turns around and just after he passes the diner—about a mile after—he loses his nerve."

"But—"

"I deduce," said Toby, "that he has a safe place of his own not far *this* side of the diner. Come on, we're going to rent some transportation."

"Will they let us?"

"We'll find out as soon as we try."

"Oh, it was all my fault, Toby. I'm sorry."

"Hey, none of that," he said. "It was not your fault that Byron died. It was not your fault that a thief or thieves came along. It was not even your fault that I drove over the border. Nothing is that simple, Annie." He was looking at her intently. "Wouldn't you rather go than sit here?"

"I sure would," she said. And they left the hotel, arm in arm.

Nobody stopped them from renting a car, although it was obvious that someone was following them. A dark car with a single man in it. But Toby shrugged him off as they started on their search.

Just before reaching the diner, they began to cruise up and down the streets of a straggly neighborhood, a poor section—a hodgepodge of small dwellings, a few shops, gas stations, and small unprosperous-looking warehouses, standing among weeds and rubbishy vacant lots. They noticed many Mexican faces. Then they began to see the uniforms: the police were here too.

"I guess they also thought of it," Toby said glumly.

They thought of it, mused Ann, and now the police will simply look. In every weed patch, in every gully, in every rubbish heap. Very simple, that way—but it takes time.

She wished, as much as Toby did, that they could somehow cut the search short. Was there anything more to deduce? Any good guesses? We are innocent travelers, she thought—at least, we were. Now, in the clutch of these circumstances, is there nothing at all that we can do to protect ourselves?

She said aloud, "St. Christopher sure didn't do much for us, did he?"

"Hold on" said Toby sharply.

"None of that, Annie."

But she smiled at him. "Don't worry about me, Toby. I'm not going to break down."

"Good girl," he murmured.

A moment later he stopped their rented car in front of another diner. "We can't do what the cops are doing. And what else we can do doesn't occur to me. No point in just riding around. Come on, let's take a coffee break."

He smiled at her, helping her out.

They paid no heed to the dark car that pulled up and parked behind them, but went into the place which at this hour of the afternoon seemed deserted. It was, however, a popular place. There was an enormous juke box and the tables were well-scarred. The establishment bore, in fact, the raffish air of a neighborhood gathering spot, by night.

The man behind the counter was small, plump, smiling, and a born host. He rested on his pink-shirted elbows and was obviously glad to see them. "Say, you folks notice all them police cars around?" he said at once. "I guess they're after somebody in the neighborhood. What do you know?" He was a born gossip, a man who liked human companionship.

Toby did not volunteer what they knew. But Ann, pulling up her wits and her spirits by a kind of prayer within herself, said,

"What kind of neighborhood is this?"

"Oh, it's a crazy mixed-up neighborhood, all right; ma'am. But not too bad. People just kinda come in all kinds, you know how it is. I'd sure like to know what's up, though. Well, what can I do for you good people?"

He exuded a keen curiosity and an enveloping good will. Ann felt that he wasn't missing a thing about them—their status in life, their relationship with each other, or their common aura of discouraged anxiety.

She said, "I'll bet you know everything about everybody who lives around here."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he objected, but not at all displeased. "I'm kinda interested in people, you know? I will say I never get lonely. Now, what can I do for you good people?" he repeated, with curious emphasis.

Ann had a strange sensation of leaping off an edge, of suddenly rising, on wings, from solid ground.

"I think I'll tell you," she said. "Will you please show us how to find a young man who lives around here, who hasn't very much money, who wears jeans, who plays an instrument, or perhaps he sings, or both, who is pretty good at it, almost a professional, who has a friend, a buddy he always runs around with . . . ?"

Toby was staring at her. She felt like staring at herself.

The man behind the counter looked thoughtful, then said "You mean Eddie Rodgers, I guess."

"Do I?" said Ann.

"Americanized his name—lots of them do, you know. Yeah, he's really pretty clever on the guitar. Probably he'll get places. Lives with his Mom and his sister. Old man Rodriguez died three or four years ago, right after he got his family into the States. Well, Josephina does the best she can, but I wouldn't say they was rich. Oh, the kid Eddie will get his break one of these days. This buddy he's got, though, this Cliff Something-or-other, he comes from somewhere else. I only seen him about two or three times, but he looks to me like he's got nobody in back of him. Know what I mean?" The little counter-man looked sorry.

Ann had her breath back. "Where does this Eddie live?"

"Why, he lives right down this street—say, three blocks. I can't give you the number. And they ain't got no phone." Ann stirred. "But listen," the man said "there's been a death. I mean, Ysobel, that's the daughter, she comes here and calls the priest, only a little bit ago."

Toby's mouth had fallen open but Ann could speak. "Do you know who died?"

"No, Ma'am, I really don't. Ysobel, she was upset, I could see that. Thing of it is, there's no older man to die—not in that family."

As Ann slipped off her stool, and Toby from his, the little man's face began to fall. He would miss them. So Ann cried out to him, "We'll be back and tell you all about it. I absolutely promise you."

The little man took this strange speech exactly as she had meant it. He beamed on her.

Outside, Ann said, "I could see my green suit in the plastic bag. But the dinner clothes—yours and Mr. Reynolds'—were gone. I remembered they were gone!"

"But who would steal a dinner jacket?"

"A bridegroom. A waiter. Someone who works at night. Say, an entertainer. That's why I said someone who plays an instrument, or maybe sings."

"We ought to tell the police," Toby had her arm and they were almost running.

"The police," she panted, "are right behind us."

They hurried, counting off three blocks, and the policeman from the dark car followed them. Then they saw the priest, standing in the weedy front yard of a very small house, talking to a dark-haired young girl. Ann ran up the path, with Toby behind her and the policeman trailing.

"Yes? Please?" The dark-haired girl rolled huge frightened eyes.

The priest said to Ann, gently, "Perhaps you don't realize there is a death here."

Ann said, "Father, do you know the deceased? Is he one of your own people?"

The priest shook his head. His intuition was very strong. "Perhaps you can help us."

"Please?" Ann looked at the girl who began to cry.

An older woman had come to the open door, and the priest spoke to her in Spanish. With a cool, proud look the woman inclined her head, inviting them in.

They all trooped through a neat front room, past the blank eye of a TV set, into a dim bedroom where, on an immaculate white spread, with his limbs straightened, his eyes decently closed, his waxen face peaceful, and dressed decorously in his own dinner clothes, Byron Reynolds lay between tall candles...

It was a good while later that Ann and Toby came back to the diner, as they had promised they would.

Their little friend in the pink shirt was a marvelous listener.

"Looks like," Toby began to wind it up, "the kids wanted the dinner clothes most, but decided to take the whole car. When they got it out of sight, in back of

Eddie's house, they started to poke around, found the body, and were scared out of their wits. They rushed off with the car, leaving the body. They wouldn't touch it, but Josephina and her daughter—they have respect for the dead." Toby swallowed.

Ann took up the tale. "Josephina couldn't bring herself to betray her son as a car thief—that's how the priest translated it. But she did what she considered most important, what she knew to be the right and absolutely necessary thing. She laid Mr. Reynolds out and she prayed for his soul." Ann swallowed.

Toby said, "The priest was having a hard time explaining the law to her—about a death certificate and everything."

"Uh huh," said their friend. "Found Eddie, did they?"

"Hiding in the shed. His buddy is not long for the streets either," Toby said. "I don't want to press charges, not against Eduardo." Toby was gloomy. "I mean, on account of his mother."

"Do Eddie all the good in the world to be punished for a stunt like that," said their friend.

"His mother doesn't think so, but—well, we just couldn't."

"You people going to get into any trouble?" the man poured more coffee.

"Mrs. Reynolds' lawyer got here," Toby told him, "and he

says that if the autopsy shows natural causes, then there'll be no trouble. But that's what it has to say—we know, we were there. So the Mexicans will shrug, Mr. Bixler thinks, since Byron was not one of their nationals and no crime was committed in Mexico."

"It's the Americans who are mad at us," Ann continued, "for getting him across the border the way we did. But—especially if Mrs. Reynolds is grateful—I guess we'll just get our wrists slapped." Nevertheless, Ann sounded downhearted.

"So?" said their friend softly, not missing their depression.

"I felt like giving Eddie my dinner jacket," Toby burst out, "but we didn't dare."

"We didn't want to offend," said Ann. "We just didn't know. I feel like such a slob, such an ignorant lazy slob, not knowing anything about a different people. Any different people from me. How they think. How they feel. Or what counts with them."

"I know just what you mean," said the little man, beaming on her. "Look at this poor Eddie. Now, he could always rent a dress suit, if he should get a job where he needs one. The job itself would be his credit. Or, I can name you ten people, right around here, who would have stood in back of him, to that extent. But some folks—his old man, for instance,

as I remember—they think a debt is a kind of shame. But I mean, in *this* country, people expect people to get a loan and pay it back. I wish Eddie would have looked around and noticed the way we do things. Probably he'll learn, though. So cheer up, good people."

Ann said, "You helped us, you know."

The man's eyes twinkled. "Say can I fix you a burger? Or a taco, maybe?"

Back at the hotel, after the

news came through that poor Byron Reynolds had had a heart attack, the Hartmans made ready to go down to a late dinner. Toby snapped his fingers.

"I'm thinking of our little friend, the counterman," he said. "We forgot to tell him one little touch—the St. Christopher Medal on the dashboard. He'd have enjoyed that—protector of travelers, and so on."

Ann smiled at him. "Yes, but no matter," she said. "Didn't you notice? He is St. Christopher."



# Ellery Queen

## "My Queer Dean!"

David C. Cooke, in his *BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR (1954)*; wrote that "My Queer Dean!" was his "favorite Queen short-short." And since the story's first appearance in print ("This Week," 1953) it has become one of the most popular short adventures of Ellery and his father. Perhaps it's the theme—the endearing "queerness" of Dr. Matthew Arnold Hope—for who can resist a double-edged spoonerism? . . .

### Detectives: ELLERY QUEEN and INSPECTOR QUEEN

THE QUEERNESS OF MATTHEW Arnold Hope, beloved teacher of Ellery's Harvard youth and lately dean of liberal arts in a New York university, is legendary.

The story is told, for instance, of baffled students taking Dr. Hope's Shakespeare course for the first time. "History advises us that Richard II died peacefully at Pontefract, probably of pneumonia," Dr. Hope scolds. "But what does Shakespeare say, Act V, Scene VI? That Exton struck him down," and here the famous authority on Elizabethan literature will pause for emphasis, "with a blushing crow!"

Imaginative sophomores have been known to suffer nightmares as a result of this remark. Older heads nod intelligently, of course,

knowing that Dr. Hope meant merely to say—in fact, thought he was saying—"a crushing blow."

The good dean's unconscious spoonerisms, like the sayings of Miss Parker and Mr. Goldwyn, are reverently preserved by aficionados, among whom Ellery counts himself a charter member. It is Ellery who has saved for posterity that deathless pronouncement of Dr. Hope's to a freshman class in English composition: "All those who persist in befouling their theme papers with cant and other low expressions not in good usage are warned for the last time: Refine your style or be exiled from this course with the rest of the vanished Bulgarians!"

But perhaps Dean Hope's greatest exploit began recently in the faculty lunchroom. Ellery arrived at the dean's invitation to find him waiting impatiently at one of the big round tables with three members of the English Department.

"Dr. Agnes Lovell, Professor Oswald Gorman, Mr. Morgan Naseby," the dean said rapidly, "Sit down, Ellery. Mr. Queen will have the cute frocktail and the horned beef hash—only safe edibles on the menu today, my boy—well, go fetch, young man! Are you dreaming that you're back in class?" The waiter, a harried-looking freshman, fled. "My friends, prepare for a surprise."

Dr. Lovell, a very large woman in a tight suit, said roguishly, "Wait, Matthew! Let me guess. Romance?"

"And who'd marry—in Macaulay's imperishable phrase—a living concordance?" said Professor Gorman in a voice like an abandoned winch. He was a tall freckled man with strawberry eyebrows and a quarrelsome jaw. "A real surprise, Dr. Hope, would be a departmental salary rise."

"A consummation devoutly et cetera," said Mr. Naseby, immediately blushing. He was a stout young man with an eager manner, evidently a junior in the department.

"May I have your attention?" Dean Hope looked about

cautiously. "Suppose I tell you," he said in a trembling voice, "that by tonight I may have it within my power to deliver the death blow—I repeat, the death blow!—to the cockypop that Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays?"

There were two gasps, a snort, and one inquiring hum.

"Matthew!" squealed Dr. Lovell. "You'd be famous!"

"Immortal, Dean Hope," said Mr. Naseby adoringly.

"Deluded," said Professor Gorman, the snorter. "The Baconian benightedness, like the Marlowe mania, has no known specific."

"Ah, but even a fanatic," cried the dean, "would have to yield before the nature of this evidence."

"Sounds exciting, Doc," murmured Ellery. "What is it?"

"A man called at my office this morning, Ellery. He produced credentials identifying him as a London rare-book dealer, Alfred Mimms. He has in his possession, he said, a copy of the 1613 edition of *The Essaies of Sir Francis Bacon Knight the kings solliciter generall*, an item ordinarily bringing four or five hundred dollars. He claims that this copy, however, is inscribed on the title page in Bacon's own hand to Will Shakespeare."

Amid the cries, Ellery asked, "Inscribed how?"

"In an encomium," quavered Dean Hope, "an encomium to Shakespeare expressing Bacon's admiration and praise for—and I quote—*the most excellent plaies of your sweet wit and hand!*"

"Take that!" whispered Mr. Naseby to an invisible Baconian.

"That does it," breathed Dr. Lovell.

"That would do it," said Professor Gorman, "if."

"Did you actually see the book, Doc?" asked Ellery.

"He showed me a photostat of the title page. He'll have the original for my inspection tonight, in my office."

"And Mimms's asking price is—?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Proof positive that it's a forgery," said Professor Gorman rustily. "It's far too little."

"Oswald," hissed Dr. Lovell, "you creak, do you know that?"

"No, Gorman is right," said Dr. Hope. "An absurd price if the inscription is genuine, as I pointed out to Mimms. However, he had an explanation. He is acting, he said, at the instructions of the book's owner, a tax-poor British nobleman whose identity he will reveal tonight if I purchase the book. The owner, who has just found it in a castle room boarded up and forgotten for two centuries, prefers an American buyer in a confidential sale—for

tax reasons, Mimms hinted. But, as a cultivated man, the owner wishes a scholar to have it rather than some ignorant Croesus. Hence the relatively low price."

"Lovely," glowed Mr. Naseby. "And so typically British."

"Isn't it," said Professor Gorman. "Terms cash, no doubt? On the line? Tonight?"

"Well, yes." The old dean took a bulging envelope from his breast pocket and eyed it ruefully. Then, with a sigh, he tucked it back. "Very nearly my life's savings... But I'm not altogether senile," Dr. Hope grinned. "I'm asking you to be present, Ellery—with Inspector Queen; I shall be working at my desk on administrative things into the evening. Mimms is due at eight o'clock."

"We'll be here at seven thirty," promised Ellery. "By the way, Doc, that's a lot of money to be carrying around in your pocket. Have you confided this business to anyone else?"

"No, no."

"Don't. And may I suggest that you wait behind a locked door? Don't admit Mimms—or anyone else you don't trust—until we get here. I'm afraid, Doc, I share the professor's skepticism."

"Oh, so do I," murmured the dean. "The odds on this being a swindle are, I should think, several thousand to one. But one can't help saying to oneself... suppose it's not?"

It was nearly half-past seven when the Queens entered the Arts Building. Some windows on the upper floors were lit up where a few evening classes were in session, and the dean's office was bright. Otherwise the building was dark.

The first thing Ellery saw as they stepped out of the self-service elevator onto the dark third floor was the door of Dean Hope's anteroom wide open.

They found the old scholar crumpled on the floor just inside the doorway. His white hairs dripped red.

"Crook came early," howled Inspector Queen. "Look at the dean's wrist watch, Ellery—smashed in his fall at 7:15."

"I warned him not to unlock his door," wailed Ellery. Then he bellowed. "He's breathing! Call an ambulance!"

He had carried the dean's frail body to a couch in the inner office and was gently wetting the blue lips from a paper cup when the Inspector turned from the telephone.

The eyes fluttered open. "Ellery . . ."

"Doc, what happened?"

"Book . . . taken . . ." The voice trailed off in a mutter.

"Book taken?" repeated the Inspector incredulously. "That means Mimms not only came early, but Dr. Hope found the book

was genuine! Is the money on him, son?"

Ellery searched the dean's pockets, the office, the anteroom. "It's gone."

"Then he did buy it. Then somebody came along, cracked him on the skull, and lifted the book."

"Doc!" Ellery bent over the old man again. "Doc, who struck you? Did you see?"

"Yes. . . Gorman. . ." Then the battered head rolled to one side and Dr. Hope lost consciousness.

"Gorman? Who's Gorman, Ellery?"

"Professor Oswald Gorman," Ellery said through his teeth, "one of the English faculty at the lunch today. Get him."

When Inspector Queen returned to the dean's office guiding the agitated elbow of Professor Gorman, he found Ellery waiting behind the dean's flower vase as if it were a bough from Birnam Wood.

The couch was empty.

"What did the ambulance doctor say, Ellery?"

"Concussion. How bad they don't know yet." Ellery rose, fixing Professor Gorman with a Macduffian glance. "And where did you find this pedagogical louse, Dad?"

"Upstairs on the seventh floor, teaching a Bible class."

"The title of my course,

Inspector Queen," said the Professor furiously, "is *The Influence of the Bible on English Literature.*"

"Trying to establish an alibi, eh?"

"Well, son," said his father in a troubled voice, "the professor's more than tried. He's done it."

"Established an alibi?" Ellery cried.

"It's a two-hour seminar, from six to eight. He's alibied for every second from 6 P.M. on by the dozen people taking the course—including a minister, a priest, and a rabbi. What's more," mused the Inspector, "even assuming the 7:15 on the dean's broken watch was a plant, Professor Gorman can account for every minute of his day since your lunch broke up. Ellery, something is rotten in New York County."

"I beg your pardon," said a British voice from the anteroom. "I was to meet Dr. Hope here at eight o'clock."

Ellery whirled. Then he swooped down on the owner of the voice, a pale skinny man in a bowler hat carrying a package under one arm.

"Don't tell me you're Alfred Mimms and you're just bringing the Bacon!"

"Yes, but I'll—I'll come back," stammered the visitor, trying to hold on to his package. But it was Ellery who won the tug of war, and as he tore the wrappings

away the pale man turned to run.

And there was Inspector Queen, in the doorway with his pistol showing. "Alfred Mimms, is it?" said the Inspector genially. "Last time, if memory serves, it was Lord Chalmerston. Remember, Dink, when you were sent up for selling a phony First Folio to that Oyster Bay millionaire? Ellery, this is Dink Chalmers of Flatbush, one of the cleverest confidence men in the rare-book game." Then the Inspector's geniality faded. "But, son, this leaves us in more of a mess than before."

"No, Dad," said Ellery. "This clears the mess up."

From Inspector Queen's expression, it did nothing of the kind.

"Because what did Doc Hope reply when I asked him what happened?" Ellery said. "He replied, 'Book taken.' Well, obviously, the book wasn't taken. The book was never here. Therefore he didn't mean to say 'book taken.' Professor, you're a devotee of the Matthew Arnold Hope Cult of Spoonerisms: What must the dean have meant to say?"

"Took...Bacon!" said Professor Gorman.

"Which makes no sense, either, unless we recall, Dad, that his voice trailed off. As if he meant to add a word, but failed. Which word? The word 'money'—'took Bacon money.' Because while the

Bacon book wasn't here to be taken, the ten thousand dollars Doc Hope was toting around all day to pay for it was.

"And who took the Bacon money? The one who knocked on the dean's door just after seven o'clock and asked to be let in. The one who, when Dr. Hope unlocked the door—indicating the knocker was someone he knew and trusted—promptly clobbered the old man and made off with his life's savings."

"But when you asked who hit him," protested the Inspector, "he answered 'Gorman'."

"Which he couldn't have meant, either, since the professor

has an alibi of granite. Therefore—"

"Another spoonerism?" exclaimed Professor Gorman.

"I'm afraid so. And since the only spoonerism possible from the name 'Gorman' is 'Morgan,' hunt up Mr. Morgan Naseby of the underpaid English department, Dad, and you'll have Doc's ten grand back."

Later, at Bellevue Hospital, an indestructible Elizabethan scholar squeezed the younger Queen hand feebly. Conversation was forbidden, but the good pedagogue and spoonerist extraordinary did manage to whisper, "My queer Dean . . ."



# O. Henry

## The Clarion Call

*A duel of wits between Detective Barney Woods who was "a man first and a detective afterward" (or so he said), and murderer Johnny Kernan who was "a judge of men" (or so he said), and how the Police and the Press joined forces... by one of the Old Masters whose stories never really grow old...*

### Detective: BARNEY WOODS

HALF OF THIS STORY CAN BE found in the records of the Police Department; the other half belongs behind the business counter of a newspaper office.

One afternoon two weeks after Millionaire Norcross was found in his apartment murdered by a burglar, the murderer, while strolling serenely down Broadway, ran plump against Detective Barney Woods.

"Is that you, Johnny Kernan?" asked Woods, who had been near-sighted in public for five years.

"No less," cried Kernan heartily. "If it isn't Barney Woods, late and early of old Saint Jo! You'll have to show me! What are you doing East? Do the green-goods circulars get out that far?"

"I've been in New York some years," said Woods. "I'm on the city detective force."

"Well, well!" said Kernan,

smiling joy and patting the detective's arm.

"Come into Muller's," said Woods, "and let's hunt a quiet table. I'd like to talk to you awhile."

It lacked a few minutes to the hour of four. The tides of trade were not yet loosed, and they found a quiet corner of the café. Kernan, well dressed, slightly swaggering, self-confident, seated himself opposite the little detective, with his pale, sandy mustache, squinting eyes, and ready-made cheviot suit.

"What business are you in now?" asked Woods. "You know you left Saint Jo a year before I did."

"I'm selling shares in a copper mine," said Kernan. "I may establish an office here. Well, well, and so old Barney is a New York detective. You always had

a turn that way. You were on the police in Saint Jo after I left there, weren't you?"

"Six months," said Woods. "And now there's one more question, Johnny. I've followed your record pretty close ever since you did that hotel job in Saratoga, and I never knew you to use your gun before. Why did you kill Norcross?"

Kernan stared for a few moments with concentrated attention at the slice of lemon in his highball; and then he looked at the detective with a sudden crooked, brilliant smile.

"How did you guess it, Barney?" he asked admiringly. "I swear I thought the job was as clean and smooth as a peeled onion."

Woods laid upon the table a small gold pencil intended for a watch charm.

"It's the one I gave you the last Christmas we were in Saint Jo. I've got your shaving mug yet. I found this under a corner of the rug in Norcross' room. I warn you to be careful what you say. I've got it put onto you, Johnny. We were old friends once, but I must do my duty. You'll have to go to the chair for Norcross."

Kernan laughed.

"My luck stays with me," said he. "Who'd have thought old Barney was on my trail!" He slipped one hand inside his coat. In

an instant Woods had a revolver against his side.

"Put it away," said Kernan, wrinkling his nose. "I'm only investigating. Aha! It takes nine tailors to make a man, but one can do a man up. There's a hole in that vest pocket. I took that pencil off my chain and slipped it in there in case of a scrap."

"Put up your gun, Barney, and I'll tell you why I had to shoot Norcross. The old fool started down the hall after me, popping at the buttons on the back of my coat with a peevish little .22, and I had to stop him. The old lady was a darling. She just lay in bed and saw her \$12,000 diamond necklace go without a chirp, while she begged like a panhandler to have back a little thin gold ring with a garnet worth about \$3. I guess she married old Norcross for his money, all right. Don't they hang on to the little trinkets from the Man Who Lost Out, though? There were six rings, two brooches, and a chatelaine watch. Fifteen thousand would cover the lot."

"I warned you not to talk," said Woods.

"Oh, that's all right," said Kernan. "The stuff is in my suitcase at the hotel. And now I'll tell you why I'm talking. Because it's safe. I'm talking to a man I know. You owe me a thousand dollars, Barney Woods, and even if you wanted to arrest me your hand

won't be able to make the move."

"I haven't forgotten," said Woods. "You counted out twenty fifties without a word. I'll pay it back some day. That thousand saved me and—well, they were piling my furniture out on the sidewalk when I got back to the house."

"And so," continued Kernan, "you being Barney Woods, born as true as steel, can't lift a finger to arrest the man you're indebted to. Oh, I have to study men as well as Yale locks and window fastenings in my business. Now, keep quiet while I ring for the waiter. I've had a thirst for a year or two that worries me a little. If I'm ever caught, the lucky sleuth will have to divide honors with the old boy Booze. But I never drink during business hours. After a job I can crook elbows with my old friend Barney with a clear conscience. What are you taking?"

The waiter came with the little decanters and the siphon and left them alone again.

"You've called the turn," said Woods, as he rolled the little gold pencil about with a thoughtful forefinger. "I've got to pass you up. I can't lay a hand on you. If I'd paid that money back—but I didn't, and that settles it. It's a bad break I'm making, Johnny, but I can't dodge it. You helped me once, and it calls for the same."

"I knew it," said Kernan, raising his glass, with a flushed smile of self-appreciation. "I can judge men. Here's to Barney, for—he's a jolly good fellow."

"I don't believe," went on Woods quietly, as if he were thinking aloud, "that if accounts had been square between you and me, all the money in all the banks in New York could have bought you out of my hands tonight."

"I know it couldn't," said Kernan. "That's why I knew I was safe with you."

"Most people," continued the detective, "look sideways at my business. They don't class it among the fine arts and the professions. But I've always taken a kind of fool pride in it. And here is where I get 'busted.' I guess I'm a man first and a detective afterward. I've got to let you go, and then I've got to resign from the force. I guess I can drive an express wagon. Your thousand dollars is further off than ever, Johnny."

"Oh, you're welcome to it," said Kernan, with a lordly air. "I'd be willing to call the debt off, but I know you wouldn't have it. It was a lucky day for me when you borrowed it. And now, let's drop the subject. I'm off to the West on a morning train. I know a place out there where I can negotiate the Norcross sparks. Drink up, Barney, and forget your troubles. We'll have

a jolly time while the police are knocking their heads together over the case. I've got one of my Sahara thirsts on tonight. But I'm in the hands—the unoffical hands—of my old friend Barney, and I won't even dream of a cop."

And then, as Kernan's ready finger kept the button and the waiter working, his weak point—a tremendous vanity and arrogant egotism—began to show itself. He recounted story after story of his successful plunderings, ingenious plots, and infamous transgressions until Woods, with all his familiarity with evildoers, felt growing within him a cold abhorrence toward the utterly vicious man who had once been his benefactor.

"I'm disposed of, of course," said Woods at length. "But I advise you to keep under cover for a spell. The newspapers may take up this Norcross affair. There has been an epidemic of burglaries and manslaughter in town this summer."

The words sent Kernan into a high glow of sullen and vindictive rage.

"To hell with the newspapers," he growled. "What do they spell but brag and blow and boodle in boxcar letters? Suppose they do take up a case—what does it amount to? The police are easy enough to fool; but what do the newspapers do? They send a lot of pinhead reporters around to

the scene; and they make for the nearest saloon and have beer while they take photos of the bartender's oldest daughter in evening dress to print as the fiancée of the young man in the tenth story, who thought he heard a noise below on the night of the murder. That's about as near as the newspapers ever come to running down Mr. Burglar."

"Well, I don't know," said Woods, reflecting. "Some of the papers have done good work in that line. There's the *Morning Mars*, for instance. It warmed up two or three trails, and got the man after the police had let 'em get cold."

"I'll show you," said Kernan, rising and expanding his chest. "I'll show you what I think of newspapers in general, and your *Morning Mars* in particular."

Three feet from their table was the telephone booth. Kernan went inside and sat at the instrument, leaving the door open. He found a number in the book, took down the receiver, and made his demand of Central.

Woods sat still, looking at the sneering, cold, vigilant face waiting close to the transmitter, and listened to the words that came from the thin, truculent lips curved into a contemptuous smile.

"That the *Morning Mars*? . . . I want to speak to the managing editor. . . Why, tell him it's someone who wants to talk to him

about the Norcross murder.

"You the editor? . . . All right. I am the man who killed old Norcross . . . Wait! Hold the wire; I'm not the usual crank . . . Oh, there isn't the slightest danger. I've just been discussing it with a detective friend of mine. I killed the old man at two thirty A.M., two weeks ago tomorrow . . . Have a drink with you? Now, hadn't you better leave that kind of talk to your funny man? Can't you tell whether a man's guying you or whether you're being offered the biggest scoop your dull dishrag of a paper ever had? . . . Well, that's so; it's a bobtail scoop—but you can hardly expect me to phone in my name and address . . . Why! Oh, because I heard you make a specialty of solving mysterious crimes that stump the police. . . . No, that's not all; I want to tell you that your rotten, lying penny sheet is of no more use in tracking an intelligent murderer than a blind poodle would be. . . . What? . . . Oh, no, this isn't a rival newspaper office; you're getting it straight. I did the Norcross job, and I've got the jewels in my suitcase at—the name of the hotel could not be learned—you recognize that phrase, don't you? I thought so. You've used it often enough. Kind of rattles you, doesn't it, to have the mysterious villain call up your great big all-powerful organ of

right and justice and good government and tell you what a helpless old gasbag you are? . . . Cut that out; you're not that big a fool—no, you don't think I'm a fraud. I can tell it by your voice. . . . Now, listen, and I'll give you a pointer that will prove it to you. Of course you've had this murder case worked over by your staff of bright young blockheads. Half of the second button on old Mrs. Norcross' nightgown is broken off. I saw it when I took the garnet ring off her finger. I thought it was a ruby. . . . Stop that! It won't work."

Kernan turned to Woods with a diabolic smile.

"I've got him going. He believes me now. He didn't quite cover the transmitter with his hand when he told somebody to call up Central on another phone and get our number. I'll give him just one more dig and then we'll make a getaway. . . . Hello! . . . Yes, I'm still here. You didn't think I'd run from such a little turncoat rag of a newspaper, did you? . . . Have me inside of forty-eight hours? Say, will you quit being funny? Now, you let grown men alone and attend to your business of hunting up divorce cases and street-car accidents and printing the filth and scandal that you make your living by. Good-bye—sorry I haven't time to call on you. I'd feel perfectly safe in your sanctum asinorum. Tra-la!"

"He's as mad as a cat that's lost a mouse," said Kernan, hanging up the receiver and coming out. "And now, Barney, my boy, we'll go to a show and enjoy ourselves until a reasonable bedtime. Four hours' sleep for me, and then the westbound."

The two dined in a Broadway restaurant. Kernan was pleased with himself. He spent money like a prince of fiction. And then a weird and gorgeous musical comedy engaged their attention. Afterward there was a late supper in a grillroom, and Kernan at the height of his complacency.

Half-past three in the morning found them in a corner of an all-night café, Kernan still boasting in a vapid and rambling way, Woods thinking moodily over the end that had come to his usefulness as an upholder of the law.

But, as he pondered, his eye brightened with speculative light.

"I wonder if it's possible," he said to himself, "I won-der if it's pos-si-ble?"

And then outside the café the comparative stillness of the early morning was punctured by faint, uncertain cries that seemed mere fireflies of sound, some growing louder, some fainter, waxing and waning amid the rumble of milk wagons and infrequent cars. Shrill cries they were when near—well-known cries that conveyed many meanings to the ears of those of

the slumbering millions of the great city who waked to hear them. Cries that bore upon their insignificant, small volume the weight of a world's woe and laughter and delight and stress. To some, cowering beneath the protection of a night's ephemeral cover, they brought news of the hideous, bright day; to others, wrapped in happy sleep, they announced a morning that would dawn blacker than sable night. To many of the rich they brought a besom to sweep away what had been theirs while the stars shone; to the poor they brought—another day.

All over the city the cries were starting up, keen and sonorous, heralding the chances that the slipping of one cogwheel in the machinery of time had made; apportioning to the sleepers while they lay at the mercy of fate, the vengeance, profit, grief, reward, and doom that the new figure in the calendar had brought them. Shrill and yet plaintive were the cries, as if the young voices grieved that so much evil and so little good was in their irresponsible hands. Thus echoed in the streets of the helpless city the transmission of the latest decrees of the gods, the cries of the newsboys—the Clarion Call of the Press.

Woods flipped a dime to the waiter, and said, "Get me a *Morning Mars*."

When the paper came he glanced at its first page, and then tore a leaf out of his memorandum book and began to write on it with the little gold pencil.

"What's the news?" yawned Kernan.

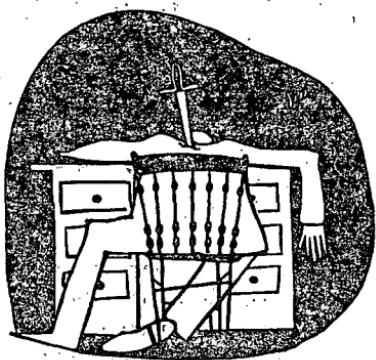
Woods flipped over to him the piece of writing:

The New York *Morning Mars*:

Please pay to the order of John Kernan the one thousand dollar reward coming to me for his arrest and conviction.

Barnard Woods

"I kind of thought they would do that," said Woods, "when you were jollying 'em so hard. Now, Johnny, you'll come to the police station with me."



# Eric Ambler

## A Bird in the Tree

You will find in John Heywood's PROVERBES, Part I, Chapter XI, that "Better one byrde in hand than ten in the woods." And Plutarch expressed the same thought in OF GARRULITY as "He is a fool who lets slip a bird in the hand for a bird in the bush." In DON QUIXOTE, Miguel de Cervantes streamlined the proverb to "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush."

We do not know if Eric Ambler's Dr. Jan Czissar—late Prague Police; at your service!—is familiar with the works of Heywood, Plutarch, or Cervantes, but we would not be surprised if he is: Dr. Czissar has an aura of being familiar with even the most unfamiliar things. In any event, Dr. Czissar's knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the classics would have seemed totally irrelevant the afternoon he busybodied himself into the Mortons Hind case. It was all quite straightforward in Assistant Commissioner Mercer's opinion—a clear case of Scotland Yard pinning the guilt on the only possible culprit—a clear case, that is, until that clever Czech refugee-detective proved that a bird in the tree is worth two clues in a ballistic expert's testimony . . .

### Detective: DR. JAN CZISSAR

IT WAS GENERALLY FELT BY his subordinates at Scotland Yard that the best time to see Assistant Commissioner Mercer was while he was drinking his afternoon tea. It was at tea time, therefore, that Detective-Inspector Denton took care to present a verbal report on the Mortons Hind case.

The village of Mortons Hind,

Denton reported, was five miles from the market town of Penborough. Near the corner of the Penborough and Leicester roads, and about half a mile from the village, stood Mortons Grange, now the home of Mr. Maurice Wretford, a retired Londoner, and his wife.

At half-past three in the afternoon of November 10th, Mr.

Wretford's chauffeur, Alfred Gregory (40), had left the Grange to drive his employer's car to a Penborough garage which was to repair a damaged fender. He had taken his bicycle with him in the back of the car so that he could ride home. He had never returned to the Grange. At half-past five that evening, a motorist driving along a deserted stretch of road about a mile from the Grange had seen the bicycle lying in a ditch and stopped. A few yards away, also in the ditch and dead, had been Gregory. He had a bullet in his head. The gun which fired it had not been found.

According to the garage manager, Gregory had left him soon after four o'clock. A waitress in a Penborough teashop, where Gregory was known, had stated that he had left the teashop just before five o'clock. This had fitted in with the opinion expressed by the police surgeon, who had examined the body at about six o'clock, that Gregory had died less than an hour previously. Obviously, Gregory had started for home immediately after he had left the teashop, and had been shot shortly before he had been found by the motorist.

The bullet, which was of .22 calibre, had entered the left temple, leaving a small circular wound halfway between the ear and the eye.

The news of the shooting had

spread quickly round the village, and late that night a gamekeeper, Harry Rudder (52), had reported to the police that the same afternoon he had seen a 19-year-old youth, Thomas Wilder, shooting at birds with a rifle not far from the spot where Gregory's body had been found. Wilder was the son of a local farmer, and the following day the police had visited his home. He had admitted that he had been firing the rifle the previous day, but denied that he had been near the Penborough road. His rifle had been examined and found to be of .22 calibre.

It had not been until later that day that the post-mortem findings given above had been made known to the police. The fatal bullet had been handed to them at the same time. To their disgust, it had been badly distorted by its impact against the bones of the head. Any identification of rifling marks had been rendered impossible. The bullet might have been fired from any .22-calibre weapon.

Gregory had had no living relatives. His employer, Mr. Wretford, had given woebegone evidence of identification. The ballistics expert, Sergeant Blundell, had later given evidence. The bullet had been fired some distance from the deceased and at a level slightly below that of his head. The witness had agreed that a shot fired from a rifle

held to the shoulder of a man six feet in height (Wilder's height was six feet) standing in the meadow to the left of the road, at a bird in the tree on the opposite side of the road, could hit a passing cyclist in the head. After that statement, young Wilder's protestations that he had not fired across the road had left the jury-men unmoved. They had returned a verdict of "accidental death caused by the criminal negligence of Thomas Wilder."

Young Wilder had then been immediately arrested.

Mercer stirred his second cup of tea rather irritably. "Yes, yes. All quite straightforward, isn't it? It's Blundell's show now. Send in your report in the usual way, Denton. I can't see why you didn't do so in the first place. There's nothing to be discussed about the affair."

Denton drew a deep breath. Then: "I don't think Wilder's guilty, sir," he said.

Mercer's frown deepened. "You don't? Why?"

Denton squirmed on his chair. "Well, sir, it isn't really my idea at all. It was that Czech refugee who was in the Prague police, that Dr. Czissar."

"Whom did you say?" asked Mercer ominously.

Denton recognized the tone of voice and went on hurriedly. "Dr. Czissar, sir. He was at the inquest. He spoke to me afterwards, and

seeing that he was a friend of Sir Herbert at the Home Office, I thought I'd better humor him. He sort of buttonholed me and I couldn't really get away. He . . ."

But Mercer was scarcely listening. He was seeing a vision—a vision of a plump, pale man with thick glasses and cowlike brown eyes, of a man wearing a long gray raincoat and soft hat too large for him, and carrying an unfurled umbrella; of this same man sitting on the chair now occupied by Denton and politely telling him, Mercer, how to do his job. Twice it had happened. Twice had Dr. Czissar sat there and proved that he was right and that Scotland Yard was wrong. And now . . .

Mercer pulled himself together. "All right, Denton. I know Dr. Czissar. Go on."

Denton drew another breath. "Well, sir, he oozed up to me after the inquest and asked me what I thought about the verdict."

Mercer smiled drily. "I'd forget Dr. Czissar's little fancies if I were you, Denton. You must remember that he's a refugee. His experiences have probably unhinged him a little. Understandable, of course."

"You mean he's dotty, sir?" Denton considered the proposition. "Well, he does look it a bit. But, begging your pardon, sir, he wasn't so dotty about that case."

If it hadn't been for him . . . It's sort of worried me, him going on about Wilder being innocent." He hesitated. "He says he's coming in to see you this afternoon, sir," he concluded.

"Oh, does he?"

"Yes, sir. About five, after the Museum reading-room closes. He says he's working on that book of his. He wants to talk to you about the case." Denton looked anxious. "If you'd let me know what he says, I'd be grateful. It's sort of got me, this case."

"All right, Denton. I'll let you know."

He was staring at his untasted second cup of tea when Dr. Czissar was announced.

Dr. Czissar came into the room, clapped his umbrella to his side, clicked his heels, bowed and said: "Dr. Jan Czissar. Late Prague police. At your service."

Mercer watched this all-too familiar performance with unconcealed dislike. "Sit down, doctor," he said shortly. "Inspector Denton tells me that you wish to make a suggestion about the Mortons Hind case."

Dr. Czissar sat down carefully and leaned forward. "Thank you, assistant commissioner," he said earnestly. "It is so good of you to receive me again."

Mercer cleared his throat. "To me, the case seems perfectly straightforward. Our expert, Blundell . . ."

"Ah!" Dr. Czissar's eyes gleamed. "That is the word. Expert. The witness whom the lawyers always attack, eh? It was so in Prague."

"What do you mean?"

"Sergeant Blundell was asked whether a shot fired from a rifle held to the shoulder of a man in the field to the left of the road at a bird in the tree on the right of the road could hit a passing cyclist and make a wound such as that found in Mr. Gregory. He very properly answered that it could."

"Well?"

Dr. Czissar smiled faintly. "Sergeant Blundell had taken measurements and made calculations. They were accurate. But he did not actually fire at any bird in that tree himself. His observations were therefore incomplete. His answer was legally correct. Mr. Gregory could have been so killed. But he was not so killed. And for a simple reason. For Wilder to have fired the shot at that particular angle, the bird would have had to be on a branch about eighteen feet from the ground. *The lowest branch on that tree is about ten feet above that!*"

Mercer sat up. "Are you sure, doctor?"

"I could not make a mistake about such a thing," said Dr. Czissar with dignity.

"No, no, of course not. Excuse me a moment, doctor." Mercer

icked up the telephone. "I want inspector Denton and Sergeant Lundell to see me immediately."

There was an embarrassed silence until they came. Then Dr. Czissar was asked to repeat his statement.

"Mercer looked at Blundell. Well?"

Blundell reddened. "It's possible, sir. I can't say that I looked at the thing from that standpoint."

Denton said: "That makes it murder, eh, doctor?"

Dr. Czissar frowned. "That," he said stiffly, "is for the assistant commissioner to decide." He turned courteously to Mercer. "If you will permit me, assistant commissioner, to make a further suggestion?"

Mercer nodded wearily. "Go ahead, doctor."

A thin smile stretched the doctor's full lips. He settled his glasses on his nose. Then he cleared his throat, swallowed hard and leaned forward. "Attention, please," he said sharply.

He had their attention.

"To you, Assistant Commissioner Mercer," began Dr. Czissar, "I would say that no lame in this matter belongs to Inspector Denton or Sergeant Blundell. They were obviously expected by the local police to prove a case of manslaughter against Wilder and they contrived to do so. The case was spoiled for them before they arrived."

"At the inquest," resumed Dr. Czissar, "Mr. Wretford, so sad at losing his good chauffeur, said that Gregory had been in his employ for three years, and that he was sober, steady and of excellent character. And the poor man had no friends or relations living. Such a pity and so unusual. I decided to investigate a little. I went to the garage at Penborough and talked to a mechanic there. I found that Mr. Wretford had made a little mistake about his chauffeur. Gregory was not very sober. Also he bet a great deal. The mechanic was able to tell me that he dealt with a bookmaker in Penborough. To this bookmaker I went next."

Dr. Czissar looked suddenly embarrassed. "I'm afraid," he said apologetically, "that I have been guilty of an offense. You see, I wished for information from this bookmaker. I said that I was from the police without saying that it was the Prague police. I hope you will consider that the information I obtained will excuse me. I found that Gregory had, in the last year, lost £237 to this bookmaker."

Mercer jumped. "What!"

"Two hundred and thirty-seven pounds, assistant commissioner. In addition, he had asked for no credit. He had received his winnings and paid his losses in pound notes. The previous year, Gregory had lost slightly less. The year

before that, less still. But in those three years quite a lot of money had passed through his hands. His wages could not have been sufficient to absorb such losses."

"He earned two pounds a week and his keep, according to Wretford," Denton put in.

Dr. Czissar smiled gently. "The bookmaker had concluded that the bets were really made by Mr. Wretford, who did not wish to have it known that he made bets. It seems that such reticences are not unusual. But Gregory was murdered. That was unusual. The bookmaker's conclusion did not satisfy me. I made other inquiries. Among other things, I found that eight years ago, just before Mr. Wretford retired, a clerk in his office was convicted of stealing £15,000 in bearer bonds and £300 in cash. I found a full report of the case in the newspaper files. The prosecution showed that he had got into debt through betting and that he had been systematically stealing small sums over a long period. The prosecution argued that, having gained confidence from the fact that his petty thefts went undiscovered, he had stolen the bonds. There was one curious feature about the affair. The bonds were not found and the prisoner refused to say anything about them except that he had stolen them. His sentence was five years in prison. His name was Selton."

"I remember the case," said Denton, eagerly. "Gregory Selton—that was the name."

"Precisely!" said Dr. Czissar. "Gregory. A young man who, until his death, was too fond of betting. He must have changed his name when he came out of prison. He was chauffeur for Mr. Wretford, the man he robbed of £15,000!"

Mercer shrugged. "Generous gesture on Wretford's part. I doesn't explain why Gregory was shot or who shot him."

Dr. Czissar smiled. "Nor why Mr. Wretford lied at the inquest?"

"What are you getting at?"

Dr. Czissar held up a finger. "Attention, please. The only logical part of that case against Selton was that he had over a long period stolen sums in cash amounting to £300 and intended to pay off racing debts. That is the thieving of a clerk. That he should suddenly steal £15,000 is different. And we only have his word for it that he did steal them."

"But why on earth should . . . ?"

"Mr. Wretford's reputation," pursued Dr. Czissar, "was not very good in London. I was told that he was the proprietor of a bucket shop, which is some slang but means that he was only technically honest, I think. I believe that those bonds were converted by Mr. Wretford for his own profit, and that he was

in danger of being found out when he discovered Selton's thefts. He was desperate, perhaps. Selton, he thought, would go to prison anyway. Let him agree to take a little extra blame and all would be well. Selton would have his reward when he came out of prison. Alas for Mr. Wretford. An idea that seems good when one is in danger is not so good when the danger has passed. Gregory Selton was not content with comfortable employment. He began, I think, to blackmail Mr. Wretford. Those racing debts, you see. More money, more money always. Threats. Blackmail. Mr. Wretford finally killed him.

"But . . ."

"But how? Ah, yes." Dr. Czissar smiled kindly upon them. "It was, I think, a sudden idea. The grounds of his house are extensive. He probably heard Wilder using the rifle nearby and thought of his own rifle. He used to be a member of a London rifle club. Selton would, he knew, be returning soon. It would be possible for him to get from his house to that place behind the hedge without going on to the road and risking being seen. When Selton was found, the blame would be put on this boy. For him, a few

months in prison; for the respectable Mr. Wretford, safety—again. He stood behind the hedge at a range of perhaps ten feet from Selton as he cycled by. It would have been difficult to miss."

Dr. Czissar stood up. "It is a suggestion only, of course," he said apologetically. "You will be able to identify Selton from his fingerprints and arrest Mr. Wretford on a charge of perjury. The rifle will no doubt be found when you search the Grange. An examination of Mr. Wretford's accounts will show that he was being blackmailed by Selton. Those large sums in one pound notes...but it is not for me to teach you your business, eh?" He smiled incredulously at the idea. "It is time for me to go. Good evening, assistant commissioner. Good evening, inspector. Good evening, sergeant."

The answering "good evenings" echoed dismally in the corridor outside as Dr. Jan Czissar departed:

For a moment there was a silence. Then:

"I knew there was something funny about this case, sir," said Denton brightly. "Clever chaps, these Czechs."

**Kelley Roos**

## Murder in the Antique Car Museum

*A detective short novel, complete in this anthology, with an unusual background and an unusual cast of characters—antique automobile collecting and the collectors who restore ancient motor cars to their once-sputtering glory—and even ride them on modern highways! If you are not an old-car buff (is that the proper term?), you will still be interested in the annual "meet" which brings together dozens of bygone cars—from the frail contraptions of the Nineties to the "fancy" models of the Twenties—a sort of historical Automobile Show with exhibitors dressed in old-fashioned dusters, veils, and goggles, with the horseless carriages polished and primed, their brass-topped radiators gleaming, their gas headlights (lamps, really) and running boards and flapping fenders making a quaint and colorful picture, nostalgic and curiously innocent—until murder strikes...*

THE TRAFFIC COP BLEW THREE sharp blasts on his whistle and motioned violently, but he was grinning. The Saturday shoppers on the busy intersection's four corners were an audience enchanted by an unexpected comedy-drama of a day gone by. They craned their necks, shouted encouragement, and applauded the efforts of the show's leading lady.

Nancy Carter sat atop the ancient, high-wheeled horseless carriage and struggled desperately to get it into low gear. She cursed her audience for their rapt attention and blessed the long duster and wide-brimmed hat with its

voluminous veil that hid her from their view. Then the stubborn gears responded, the Swensen Seat, model 1909, lurched forward. A gasp of relief burst from Nancy's lips, and the crowd cheered. Then the four-cylinder motor sputtered and died.

Nancy set her teeth and waited for the inevitable taunt. It came immediately. A loud, raucous voice shouted, "Get a horse!" The crowd roared with laughter.

Snatching the crank from the floorboards, Nancy climbed down from her seat. The policeman met her at the car's brass-topped radiator.

"Let me wind her up for you," he said.

"No thank you," she said coldly. "It might break your arm."

"What about your arm? A little thing like you!"

"I've been cranking these monsters for years. One side, please, Officer."

A few minutes later she was chugging out of the small New York town, once again on her way to Connecticut. Her cheeks were still flaming with embarrassment. Stalling on that corner had been the final indignity of her trip. She had had tire trouble, motor trouble, all the trouble possible. She was already hours late for the antique car meet at Harvey Worth's estate in Wexford. It would be over before she even got there.

Never, never again, she vowed, would she be caught aboard one of her father's playthings. Old cars were his hobby; let him put them through their paces. After having served sixteen of her twenty-two years as his grease monkey and, lately, his assistant driver, she had had just a little too much of the whole thing. But she had to laugh at her indignation; she wasn't being fair. She was making this trip for her own selfish, private reasons. She hadn't fooled her father on that point.

When he had been laid low by a nasty cold, she had made a noble gesture. She had offered

to drive the newest addition to his collection in Saturday's meet. Her father had immediately seen through her nobility. He had known that it was because of Joel that she had made the offer. He had chuckled and wished her luck.

She had first met Harvey Worth's nephew on an old-car trek to Buffalo in the spring, and from then on he had practically taken over her social life. Theater dates in New York, country house parties in Vermont, Sundays at her home in Westchester, with Joel behaving toward Mr. and Mrs. Carter exactly like, Nancy had thought hopefully at the time, a future son-in-law.

And then, suddenly, without warning, no word from Joel at all. During sleepless nights she had tried to arrive at an explanation for his silence but without success. Something had happened and she had to know what.

She turned right off Route 29 and soon, from a rise in the road, she was looking down over the half-mile track that Harvey Worth had built on his property. She could see dozens of car models, ranging from the flimsy inventions of the eighteen nineties to the powerful elaborations of the nineteen twenties. She could see the owners, their families and friends, all dressed in dusters, veils, and goggles. It made a colorful picture, quaint and pretty.

At the moment the track was

studded with brightly painted peach baskets. A flamboyant Stutz Bearcat was running the obstacles against time and, in spite of the driver's costume, she knew it was Joel driving the car his uncle had given him. She urged the Scat to go a little faster.

When she reached the track she found the Bearcat parked, apart from the other cars, beneath an autumn-tinted oak. She pulled in beside it. She stood up behind the steering wheel and looked out across the crowd, which was roaring now as a pair of early Tin Lizzies raced each other on the track. She couldn't see Joel. But the Stutz was his; he was here some place.

Nancy jumped down to the grass and dodged through a quartet of enthusiasts gathering to inspect this rarity, a 1909 Scat. A voice called, "Hello, Miss Carter!" She turned and saw Charley Ball, Mr. Worth's elderly mechanic, smiling at her. "We been worried about you," he said.

"I had trouble on the way up, Charley. Do you want to buy a Scat?"

"So that's what it is! Where'd your father dig it up?"

"A secret agent of his found it down South. Father spent all summer restoring it. With my invaluable assistance, of course. I only handed him the wrong monkey wrench twice."

The old man chortled, "That's

the way to your father's heart. Too bad about him coming down sick."

"It's nothing serious, Charley."

A smiling couple came walking toward them. The woman was perhaps in her early forties, but her face had the wide-eyed prettiness of a sub-deb. The duster she wore couldn't hide the lush curves of her small figure. Her veil was raised to the brim of her hat; it was a halo crowning a happy cherub.

The man, in costume too, was younger than she, pleasant, and a bit too good-looking. He was looking directly at Nancy with eyes that were at once curious and flattering. Nancy noticed the woman's hand tighten possessively on his arm.

"Charley," he said, "is this Nancy Carter?"

"Yes, it is, Randy. Miss Carter, meet Mrs. McLane and Randy Fuller."

"How do you do?" Nancy said.

"Randy's a new neighbor of ours," Charley said.

"And I'm an old neighbor," Mrs. McLane said. "An old, tired neighbor."

"Mrs. McLane," Charley said, "today you look sixteen."

Old Charley had said exactly what was expected of him. Sharon McLane glowed happily. "Why, Charley, I believe you mean that." She blinked her eyes coquettishly at Randy Fuller. "Did you hear

what Charley said? Do you think I'm safe around him?"

"Now, now, Mrs. McLane," Charley said, embarrassed.

Randy laughed and turned back to Nancy. "I've been asked to look out for you."

"Thanks," Nancy said. "Where is Mr. Worth?"

"He's gone back up the hill to tend to some business," Randy said.

"Such lovely, lovely business," Sharon McLane said. "You're just in time, Nancy, to help us celebrate after the meet."

"I'll do my best. What are we celebrating?"

"Harvey Worth is buying some land from my husband . . . but I'll let Harvey tell you about it. He'd massacre me if I spoiled his fun."

"Oh," Nancy said, "then it's something to do with old cars."

"Of course," Sharon said. "You know Harvey."

"Nancy," Randy said, "it was Amy who asked me to watch for you."

"I'm anxious to meet Amy."

She had heard a great deal about Amy Shaw from Joel. Amy was Harvey Worth's stepdaughter. Her mother had died not long after their marriage, but Amy had stayed to grow up in the mansion on the hill. She and Joel had been playmates, then almost inseparable friends.

Charley Ball said, "Joel's here, too."

"Yes," Nancy said, "I saw his car. I suppose it's too late for me to race Mr. Worth's Hupp now."

"'Fraid so," Charley said. "They got three more races scheduled and not much daylight left."

"What's that you're driving, Nancy?" Randy asked.

"A Swensen Scat, 1909. It's my father's pride and joy. Only a few of them were ever made. They're as rare as a day in June."

"Well, it's a new one on me," Randy said. "I've never even heard of it."

"I've heard about them," Charley said, "but this is the first one I ever seen. Mrs. McLane, your husband had one once, didn't he?"

"No. It was Ward's cousin, Leo Frayne. That was years ago." Her eyes darkened and she gave a little sigh. "Dear Leo." Then her eyes were sparkling again. "This is such a lucky day for the McLane family. Maybe Leo will decide to come home again."

"All is forgiven," Randy said.

"Now, Randy." Mrs. McLane pouted girlishly. "You don't listen to gossip, do you?"

"Is there gossip?" Randy asked.

"Well, why did you say that?" She gave him a questioning sideways glance. "What have you heard about Leo and me?"

"Stop it, Sharon," Randy said, laughing. "Stop making yourself such a *femme fatale*."

"It's been so dull around here,"

Sharon said. "Until today. Now everything's wonderful! I don't care *what* people say about Harvey Worth. I think he's sweet. All that nice money..."

A voice through a megaphone bellowed out the next event. A turn of the century Olds with a *dos-à-dos* seat was to defend its honor against a single-cylinder Winton. Charley darted off, and Mrs. McLane, with Randy firmly in tow, moved closer to the track.

Nancy couldn't get interested in the races. She wandered through the crowd, nodding at people she'd met at other meetings. She didn't see anyone who might be Amy, and she didn't see Joel. She decided finally to go up the hill and check in with her host of the week-end. She was sure to see Joel later.

He was living now with his uncle. A year or two ago he had given up a job doing publicity for a New York publisher and had started a printing business, the Wexford Press. His enthusiasm and initiative seemed to be making up for his lack of business experience.

She backed her car away from the Stutz and started up the section of winding, dusty road that Harvey Worth had restored so that the old-fashioned cars could perform in their natural habitat. If her father was a fanatic about his hobby, Nancy thought, Worth was a raving maniac. She had

seen a lot of him on the Buffalo jaunt, but she had heard him utter scarcely a word that didn't concern antique cars. He seemed to her an arrogant, ruthless old gentleman, but his interest in his hobby was disarming.

She was battling her way over the tricky ruts when the roar of a powerful motor pushed to its limit surged up the hill. In a moment, looking over her shoulder, she saw the machine rise out of the dust. It was the Stutz Bearcat. Nancy braked her car gently and smiled to herself. Joel had heard that she'd arrived; he was coming after her.

She slowed her car more, edging close to the deep ditch beside the road. She glanced back again. The Stutz wasn't slowing down. It seemed, instead, to be gaining more speed, to be hurtling straight at her.

Instinctively, Nancy wrenched the steering wheel to the right. Her light car slid into the ditch, teetering there, while she struggled to keep it from overturning. She saw the Stutz rush by, then the dust blinded her. Her car tilted slowly and she jumped clear of it, landing on her knees in the ditch. Above her the two left wheels spun helplessly in the air.

She climbed up onto the road and stood listening to the fading roar of the Stutz Bearcat. Abruptly the sound snapped off.

She clenched her hands to stop

their trembling. In spite of the dust, she had seen the Stutz when it was a good fifty yards behind her, so Joel *must* have seen her car. The road here was wide enough for a safe passing, but he had deliberately driven her into the ditch. He must have known that she might have been badly hurt, yet he had rushed on without stopping.

It couldn't have happened, she told herself. There could have been no reason for its happening. But her Swensen Scat lay on its side in the ditch.

Her fright turned suddenly to anger. She slipped out of the dirt-stained duster, picked up her hat from the ditch, and threw them on the car. Then she started up the road, primed for battle. All she wanted was to get at Joel Worth. She'd show him. She'd roll him into a ditch and leave him with his wheels spinning in mid-air. And she wouldn't need a Stutz Bearcat to do it with, either. She'd do it with her bare hands—so help her, she would.

She was out of breath when she reached the top of the hill where the road stopped to form a T. One part of it rose gently toward a rambling stone house, the other sloped down to a big red barn. Before it, on the driveway, stood the Bearcat.

She started toward the barn, across a smooth green terrace of lawn, across a graveled apron of

the barn's entrance. She moved toward the great double doorway, opening her mouth to call Joel's name. The rumbling sound of a voice stopped her dead.

It was Harvey Worth inside the barn, his voice cold with rage, each word a venomous dart: "Not one dollar, not one cent... don't come whining to me, you're wasting your time and mine..."

There was a silence and Nancy strained to hear Joel's voice in answer to his uncle's. But she heard only the old man's voice again, rising in a rage that seared its way through the barn's wall. "You got yourself into this mess, get yourself out of it... or take your punishment!"

She found herself backing hastily out of earshot, not wanting to hear any more, trying not to believe what she had already heard. It was impossible, all of it. None of it could have really happened—Joel driving her off the road, Joel in some trouble that involved the threat of punishment.

She stood watching the doorway, waiting for Joel to appear. But the doorway remained an empty rectangle and there was no sound at all from inside the great red building. Slowly, almost in spite of herself, she moved forward again until she stood inside the barn.

One half of it was a garage that housed the mobile section of

Mr. Worth's hobby; the other half was a museum. There were a dozen or more oddities of the early auto age, impossible to restore to running order, but still collectors' items. There were wax figures in the motoring costumes of the period at the wheels of the cars and posed as passengers. But there was no sign of a living person.

Nancy walked farther into the barn. She walked past a humorous tableau of life-sized dolls, a family taking a Sunday outing in their touring car. She passed a towering, black sedan and in front of it she saw the crumpled body.

She dropped to her knees, reaching out her hand to the still figure, and then drew it back. She had seen the brutally beaten head and she knew at once that Harvey Worth had been murdered.

Behind her a door opened quietly, then closed again. With a little cry she struggled to her feet and turned toward the sound. "It's Mr. Worth," she said. "he's dead..."

It was a moment before she realized that there was no one with her in the museum, no one but the crumpled body at her feet and the lifeless figures grouped about the cars. The door had opened, not for someone's entrance, but for a murderer's escape.

She found the door beyond a partition built to form a sort of

office. She flung it open and saw an empty stretch of lawn and the leafy, concealing curtain of the nearby woods.

She turned and ran back through the barn, out through the big front doors through which she had entered. Above a rise of land she could see the slate roof of Harvey Worth's house. She started across the roadway toward it, and then stopped.

The Stutz Bearcat was still standing in front of the barn. The car whose driver had forced her into a ditch, that had carried its driver to a furious quarrel with Harvey Worth. Joel's car! But it wasn't Joel who had been driving it.

Nancy had an unassailable certainty of that. Joel was not a murderer. But his car stood outside the museum and, inside, on the floor of the barn, his uncle lay killed.

She turned away from the house, and ran blindly, wildly down the road. There was only one thought in her mind now. She had to get to Joel, to warn him.

Before she reached the field the sound of the crowd drifted up to her and then, in a moment, she was darting through the chattering groups of people. She saw a tall, dark-haired young man, his cap and goggles swinging from his hand, detach himself from one group and start toward another.

She called out to him. He turned and saw her and she stood stiffly, unable to move, as he came toward her.

"Nancy," he said, "they told me you finally got here."

"Joel," she said. "Oh, Joel."

"Nancy, what is it?"

"Your car—the Stutz—do you know where it is?"

He looked puzzled. "It's parked over on the other side of the track. Why, Nancy?"

"It wasn't you," she whispered. "I knew it wasn't you. But he took your car..."

"Who? Nancy, what's the matter?"

"It's your uncle." She took a deep breath. "He's dead, Joel. He's been murdered."

He looked at her; his face white and expressionless. "Where did it happen?"

"In the barn, the museum. I thought you were there, I thought you..." She hesitated and Joel grasped her shoulders.

"That I what, Nancy?"

"Someone drove me off the road. It was your car. I thought you were in it. And up there I heard your uncle...he was fighting with someone and I still thought it was you. But then when I found him dead, I knew I was wrong. I knew it couldn't have been you—"

He put his arm around her. "I'll go up, Nancy. You needn't come."

But she followed him to a car, climbed in after him. She sat silently, hunched in a corner, as the car climbed the rutted road. They came to the place where the little Scat hung tilted over the ditch.

Joel's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "You might have been killed," he said, his voice hard.

They crossed the crest of the hill and the barn lay close below them, the Stutz Bearcat parked before it. Joel swerved in beside the Stutz and Nancy followed him into the building.

Only a little of the October dusk seeped into the barn; it was dark with shadows. She stood and waited until Joel flicked a switch and the place sprang into light.

She said, "By the sedan. The big black one over there."

He moved quickly through the maze of cars and mannequins to the sedan, then crouched down beside it. In a moment he rose and came back to her.

"There's no phone here, Nancy. Will you call the police?"

"From the house?"

He nodded, and she turned and left the barn and climbed the driveway to the big house beneath the ancient trees. There was a phone just inside the front door in the entrance hall, and in a moment she was telling the Wexford police that Harvey Worth had been murdered.

Joel was standing motionless beside the black sedan when she got back. She said; "Joel, they're coming. They'll be here soon." "Thanks, Nancy. I should have told you to stay up at the house." "No, Joel."

Outside there was the sound of cars pulling in beside the barn. Swift footsteps stirred the drive's gravel, then three men and two women came through the door.

A tall, dark, dramatically handsome girl wearing narrow black slacks and a white tweed jacket was leading the way. Behind her were Randy Fuller and the mechanic, Charley Ball, then Sharon McLane and, at her side, a short, heavy-set man.

The tall girl came directly to Nancy, her lovely face shadowed with concern. "Nancy," she said, "I'm Amy. We saw your car in the ditch down there. Are you all right?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "I'm all right. I..."

She felt Joel's hand on her shoulder. He said, "Amy, Harvey is dead. He's been murdered."

"Murdered!"

Amy's eyes closed and she swayed, and at once Joel was at her side. From Sharon McLane's lips burst a rasping, muffled cry.

"No," she cried. "No, it isn't true! He isn't dead. He can't be dead!"

"Mrs. McLane!" Joel said sharply.

"Sharon!" The short man moved toward his wife and she whirled to face him.

"He's dead," she said between clenched teeth. "Did you hear that, Ward? Harvey's dead and now it's too late—"

"Sharon," he said again. He put his arm around her and the gesture was comforting, but his voice was a command. "Sharon, stop it! You mustn't do this."

"The police are coming," Joel said. "I'll wait here for them. The rest of you go up to the house."

Amy took a step toward the door, then turned back. She leaned against the radiator of an old museum piece. "I'll wait here with you, Joel," she said.

None of the others spoke. No one made a move to leave Joel alone with the responsibility of facing the police. They paced nervously, silently, about the vast, gloomy barn, avoiding the corner with the black sedan, but unable to remain motionless.

The tension grew until it became almost unbearable. Amy stepped forward suddenly with a little sob, then she walked jerkily across the room, out of Nancy's sight.

A great flood of weariness surged over Nancy. Her emotion was spent now. She felt cold with exhaustion. She moved back into the corner to a red racing car with its mannequin driver staring in dismay at a flat tire.

As she sank down on the car's running board, the great overhead electric lights flickered and the place was plunged into blackness. Sharon McLane screamed, then giggled in frightened hysteria. Other voices called out, and Charley Ball's rose above them.

"It's a fuse, I guess. I'll see to it."

It was quiet again except for the sound of Charley's footsteps as he cautiously made his way toward the fuse box. Nancy sat where she was, straining her eyes through the darkness. The huge doorway to the barn was visible, a gaping gray mouth.

Inside the barn she could make out nothing but the blurred shapes of automobiles and shadowy figures, the still ones that were mannequins, and the moving ones. She sensed a movement somewhere near her.

She said, "Charley, is it you?"

No one answered her, but she could hear a soft, slithering sound, nearer to her now. She got up from the running board and moved blindly forward a step or two. She said Charley's name again.

Still there was no answer. And now there was not even a whisper of a movement.

The blow came from behind her—a violent, powerful thrust that sent her sprawling to the floor. She screamed as she fell.

Footsteps moved rapidly and a voice was shouting, "Who

screamed? What's wrong?" and another voice pleaded, "Charley, will you get those lights on?"

Nancy pulled herself to her knees as the lights slashed away the darkness. They were coming toward her, Joel and Amy and the others, their questions a frightening jangle. In the distance a police-car siren hummed higher and higher . . .

It was the second time in the past two hours that Nancy was seated across the desk from the bespectacled, gray-haired policeman. The first time that she had been summoned from the staid Victorian living room into Harvey Worth's study, she had been closeted alone with the Chief of Police. This time Joel was beside her on the leather couch.

The policeman centered his attention on Nancy. He said, "You've had more chance to think back now, Miss Carter. Do you still have no idea who was driving the Stutz when it forced you off the road?"

"No," Nancy said. "No idea at all."

"But it was a man?"

"Well, the person wore a man's cap. That's all I was able to see. It might have been a woman wearing a cap, goggles, and duster."

"I suppose so. Now about the quarrel . . . you say you only heard Mr. Worth's voice. Think

back again, Miss Carter. You're sure you didn't hear him mention a name?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't."

The policeman rose from behind the desk, stood before Nancy and Joel. "I don't want to frighten you, Miss Carter. Let's say I want to help you by warning you."

"Yes, Mr. Kroll."

"Those lights going out in the barn was no accident. We found a blackened screwdriver on the workbench. It had been stuck into a socket to cause a short circuit. Someone blew that fuse for a reason. Maybe the reason was to kill you, Miss Carter."

Joel said quietly, "That's what I'm afraid of."

"No," Nancy said. "I'm sure that wasn't it. I—"

"What makes you so sure?" Kroll asked.

"I don't know exactly. But it was such—such an inept attempt if it was murder. You'd think he would have got his hand over my mouth so I couldn't scream . . ."

"He swung at your head," Joel said grimly. "And he missed."

"But it was more like a push, as though he were trying to get somewhere or do something, and I got in his way and stopped him. I'm sure that's all it was. Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"You saw the murderer when he passed you in the Stutz," Kroll said. "You heard the quarrel he

had with Harvey in the barn."

"But I didn't see his face. I didn't hear his voice!"

The policeman's lips twisted in a humorless smile. "Have you told the killer that, Miss Carter? And did he believe you?"

There was a knock on the study door. A young uniformed policeman came into the room, followed by Charley Ball. The mechanic's face was gray with strain.

The young policeman said, "Charley and I thought you'd want to know about this right away, Mr. Kroll."

"What is it, Wes? You find the weapon?"

"Well, no. It was something we didn't find, something that could have been the weapon, and it's gone now. Charley, you tell him about it."

"It's an old car part, a piece of a spring—a section of a spring leaf that was broke off," Charley said.

"It could have been used as a weapon?"

"Sure. A car spring isn't a coil; it's a layer of steel strips. This thing was broke off a foot long. It's a couple of inches wide, and heavy. It could kill a man, no doubt of that."

"Sounds like it might have been used on Mr. Worth. You mean this thing was broken off a car in the barn?"

"No," Charley said. "Some kids

found it a couple of days ago over on the McLane property. In the mud by the edge of the lake. The kids brought it to Mr. Worth. They thought he'd be interested in it, and he sure was. He couldn't figure out what make of car it came from, and neither could I." Charley smiled wryly. "It made him mad not to know. He figured he knew everything there was to know about old cars."

"You're sure it was part of an old car?" Kroll said.

"Certain. Nowadays springs are pretty much the same, but in the old days, when practically every fellow that had a machine shop tried his hand at making a horseless carriage, there was a lot more variety in the cars. Some of the builders got pretty fancy. They might make the springs in a pretty design, or put some fancy etching on it. Like this one. I'd say this one was real old. Probably early nineteen hundreds."

"Did Mr. Worth keep it in any special place?"

"In that big wall case in the garage end of the barn."

"And when did you see it last, Charley?"

"Well, now," Charley said, "I seen it early this afternoon. When Mr. and Mrs. McLane stopped by on their way to the meet, Mr. Worth had me get it to show to them. But Ward McLane couldn't even guess what make of car it was from."

"Did you put it back in the case?"

"No, I was in a hurry to get down to the track. I left it on a bench in the garage."

Kroll said, "You ever see this thing, Joel?"

"Yes. My uncle showed it to everybody who came near the barn. It was driving him crazy, not being able to identify what car it came from."

"When did you see it last?"

"Yesterday when Harvey showed it to me."

"Well, it's possible nobody will ever see it again. Maybe the killer got it out of the barn. But maybe he didn't. Wes, is Hood still around?"

"Yes, sir." "You and Hood go through that barn again. If that spring leaf or strip is there, you find it."

"Yes, sir," Wes said. He turned back at the door. "The McLanes and Mr. Fuller are still waiting. Will you be wanting them again?"

"I might. Tell them I haven't forgotten them."

After Wes had gone, Kroll turned to the mechanic. "But I won't be needing you any more tonight, Charley, and thanks."

"Anything I can do. Anything Mr. Worth had his faults, but we—we got along."

"I know you did, Charley. Good night."

"Good night," Charley said,

and closed the door behind him.

Kroll went back to the desk chair. He sat quietly for a moment, studying the blank green blotter before him. Then he sighed and moved forward in his chair.

"Joel," he said, "remember the times I used to chase you and your friends home late at night?"

"Sure. You kept us kids out of a lot of trouble."

"I knew your uncle twice as long as I've known you—you or Amy. He was a pretty good friend of mine, Joel."

"I know that, sir."

"Right now I wish I wasn't Chief of Police." He took a long breath. "Joel, Ward McLane told me about your uncle's plan to buy his land. The deal was all set. Eighteen thousand dollars for the seventy acres. They were going to sign the papers this evening. But your uncle was killed before he could do that."

"Yes," Joel said carefully. "Yes, he was."

"You and Amy are your uncle's heirs, Joel."

"That's right."

"That might make you interested in how he spent his money."

Joel didn't move. Very quietly he said, "I suppose you had to say that."

"I know how you felt about Harvey buying that land. When you heard the news from Sharon McLane at the meet this after-

noon, you blew your top, didn't you, Joel?"

"Yes," Joel said. He was making an effort to keep his voice steady. "Yes, I blew my top. That land isn't worth one thousand dollars, you know that. The railroad ruined it, the embankment turned it into a swamp and lake. You know what he wanted it for—to reconstruct the old turnpike that runs through it, so he could play with his cars on it. I thought that was going too far with a hobby. It would have been a childish squandering of money."

"Of money that would some day be yours." The old man waved down Joel's attempt to speak. "It made you so mad, Joel, that you left the meet."

"Yes. I took a walk to cool off."

"But did you cool off, Joel? You knew Harvey had come up here to phone his lawyer. He wanted the papers drawn up right away for the land deal. Maybe that made you even hotter. So hot that you jumped in the Stutz and roared up that road—"

"No!" Nancy said. "It wasn't Joel!"

"You said it could have been anyone, Miss Carter. All right, Joel, suppose you found Harvey in the barn and had a row with him over the money. Suppose you lost your head, you didn't know what you were doing—"

"No!" Joel said. "Look, Mr. Kroll; it doesn't make sense. If I'd gone up to the barn to commit a murder, would I have roared up in my own car and left it standing there afterward? Everyone knows the Stutz is mine."

"I don't think you planned to murder him, Joel. I couldn't think that of you. But if you did, then you'd know that your car had been seen. Your one chance would be to sneak back to the meet through the woods and hope that everyone would think just what Miss Carter here is saying—that it was someone else in your car."

"It wasn't Joel," Nancy said firmly. "I know it wasn't Joel."

"I hope you're right, Miss Carter. I wish you could prove you're right." He turned to Joel and his smile was sad. "I'm sorry to have to say these things, Joel. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," Joel said. "You're sorry, but still you're accusing me of murder."

"At the moment I'd say accusing is too strong a word."

"All right," Joel said. "What happens now? Do I get myself a lawyer?"

"Right now you and I will talk to each other a little more. Maybe we can even find you an alibi."

He rose and put his hand under Nancy's elbow, propelling her toward the door. "That's all for

now, Miss Carter. I think it's time you got a little rest."

She glanced back over her shoulder, past the closing door. Her eyes met Joel's, and she tried to return his smile of reassurance.

Then the door closed . . .

In the gloomy, chilly cavern of a living room the four people were seated before a dying fire. Their eyes were all on Nancy, asking her the questions; but it was Amy who put it into words.

"What are they doing in there, Nancy?"

"Mr. Kroll . . . he's trying to help Joel. But it's worse than if he were being rough."

Randy Fuller said, "But he can't think that Joel murdered—"

"He is thinking that," Nancy interrupted. "Exactly that."

"He's a stupid old man," Sharon said. "A stupid, small-town cop."

"You know he isn't," Amy said.

"That's what makes it so horrible. If he can believe it . . ."

Her voice trailed off and she sank back on the divan. No one spoke. Then Sharon was moving to the table by the windows. She tilted a decanter of brandy toward a glass.

Gently, Ward McLane said, "Don't pour yourself another drink, Sharon."

She answered him without even looking in his direction. "Of course I won't pour myself

another one, dear, if you say so." She put the decanter back on the tray. "Randy will pour it for me, won't you, Randy?"

"Now, Sharon," Randy said uneasily.

Amy rose quickly. "Nancy, you should have some food."

"No, thanks, Amy."

"A cup of tea, maybe? Is there anything I can do?"

"I'd like to lie down a while. I'm a little shaky."

She climbed the broad stairway to her room. Her overnight bag was still in the ditched Scat, but Amy had been thoughtful. Pajamas and a robe were folded over a chair. She took a hot bath that did nothing to soothe her jangled nerves.

She started to get into the pajamas, then knew that sleep was impossible. She dressed again and tried to rest on the chaise lounge. In a moment she knew that even that was a mistake. She was only torturing herself waiting in her room, wondering what was happening in the study downstairs.

She slipped quietly down the stairs and into the living room. Randy and Amy were standing before the fireplace; the McLanes were gone. The door to the study stood open and the lights in the room were out. Nancy looked silently from Amy to Randy Fuller.

Randy said, "Mr. Kroll has taken him into town, Nancy."

"Taken him . . . you mean he's charging Joel with murder?"

"It's not that bad yet. The case goes beyond Kroll's jurisdiction; the State Police are moving in now. Joel's gone to talk to them."

Nancy said, "What are we going to do? What can we do?"

"Wait," Amy said hopelessly. "Just wait."

"We've got to do something," Nancy said. "Amy, you were down there at the meet when Joel's car was taken. You were, too, Randy. Didn't you see anyone? Try to remember—can't you remember?"

Miserably, Amy shook her head.

"There were almost three hundred people there, Nancy," Randy said. "And so many cars; so much confusion. Joel's car could have been taken without anyone noticing it."

"But surely someone must have seen Joel, someone must be able to give him an alibi. We've got to find—"

"We're trying to, Nancy," Randy said. "Five members of the club are calling everyone who was at the meet. We're trying to find an alibi for him."

"Nancy," Amy said softly, "are you in love with Joel?"

"Yes," Nancy said.

"Has he told you that he loves you, Nancy?"

"No—no, he hasn't."

Then unsaid words burned

Nancy's throat. "You tell me, Amy, you tell me that he loves me . . . you'd know, Amy, you must know" . . . but Amy wasn't even looking at her. She was moving toward a table, picking up a cigarette, lighting it.

It was Randy who spoke, quickly, "I'll be running along, Amy. Unless there's something more I can do."

"No, you've been fine, Randy."

His smooth, pleasant face was grim. "I promised our committee of five that I'd be at home if they needed me. Good night, Amy. Nancy. I'll be over in the morning."

Amy saw him to the door. Nancy heard the click of a lock and then Amy was standing in the living room's archway. "Let's make ourselves some coffee, Nancy," she said. "There's no use trying to sleep, is there?"

"No. I'd like some coffee."

She sat on a high stool in the square, old-fashioned kitchen while Amy rummaged through the larder. Soon Amy had scrambled eggs and toasted muffins, made a pot of coffee. She put a heaping plate before Nancy, and sat down across the table from her.

She lit a cigarette and immediately stubbed it out with fingers that were shaking. The shock of murder had seared the beauty from her face, leaving it strained and haggard. Her long, smooth black hair had become undone

and was tumbling down her shoulders. Her eyes were almost blank with fatigue.

Gently, Nancy said, "We've all been so worried about Joel that we've almost forgotten . . . I mean, Mr. Worth meant a great deal to you, didn't he, Amy? He was your family."

"Yes. He was all the family I can remember."

"I'm so sorry, Amy, I—"

"Don't," Amy said. "Don't feel sorry for me, Nancy. I haven't lost someone I deeply loved. Oh, for years people have said that Harvey was just like a father to me. It isn't true. He wasn't. He was basically selfish. His generosity to me always had its price. He gave only what he wanted to give and he demanded that you be grateful, endlessly grateful. And in the last few years, since he's been interested in his cars, it's been worse. He's been like a child, a mean and spiteful child. He forced people to play a game he wanted to play. That Stutz Bearcat wasn't a gift to Joel. It was Harvey's idea of a bribe that would trap Joel into being grateful and acquiescent."

She was silent for a moment, her eyes brooding. "That car . . . if Harvey hadn't given it to Joel . . ."

"Amy, don't. They won't hold Joel for murder. He's innocent—we both know that. They'll find it out, too."

Amy didn't answer and Nancy said, her voice rising in disbelief; "You don't think, Amy, that Joel—you must know that it wasn't he."

"Of course I know," Amy said harshly. "It wasn't Joel, it wasn't any of us who killed him. It was an outsider, someone who stole the car to get to the barn, who sneaked inside and . . ."

Nancy shook her head. "No, no one sneaked into the barn. Whoever it was, Amy, roared right up to it in the Stutz. He fought with Mr. Worth before he killed him. Remember, I heard them quarreling."

"Yes," Amy said softly. "If it had been Joel, that's just what he would have done—roar up to the barn, storm into it. But the murderer didn't do that. He cut the motor at the top of the hill and drifted down to the barn. Because he was a stranger, an outsider."

"Yes," Nancy said, "that's right."

She remembered now how she had stood in the road beside the ditch and listened to the Stutz charge up the hill away from her. She had heard the sound of its motor suddenly cut off, too soon for it to have reached the barn. It had happened, as Amy said; the motor was cut at the top of the hill, and the car rolled silently down the roadway to its destination.

"If they'd let Joel alone," Amy said, "if they'd look for the murderer."

She rose wearily and carried the two cups to the stove, relit the fire under the coffeepot. Nancy swung around to face her. "Amy," she said, and stopped. She had told no one that the engine of the Stutz had been turned off at the top of the hill; until now she hadn't even realized it had happened.

But Amy had known.

Amy turned away from the stove. Her eyes met Nancy's and her face tightened.

"What is it, Nancy?"

"How did you know about the motor, Amy? How could you have known?"

"I didn't know. I was guessing, trying to figure out . . ."

"You knew, Amy. And you couldn't have known unless it was you driving the car."

"No!" She was close to Nancy now, her hands gripping Nancy's shoulders. "You're wrong. I didn't drive that car."

"But you knew its motor had been cut. How did you know that, Amy?"

"I . . . All right, I'll tell you. I was in the barn. I was the one you heard quarreling with Harvey. But I didn't kill him. He was all right when I left."

"You were there," Nancy said. "Why haven't you told the police that?"

"What good would it have done? I didn't see anyone, I don't know anything. I walked up through the woods to see Harvey, I left through the side door. I didn't see Joel's car. I couldn't help by telling."

"You could help Joel. They think he was fighting with his uncle. You could tell them it wasn't Joel; you could prove it to them!"

"I . . . yes, but if I did that . . ."

"I know!" She tried to keep herself from shouting at the tall, cold-eyed girl. "You could help Joel, but it brings you into the picture. No one knows that you needed money desperately, do they? They don't know that you begged Harvey Worth for it and he refused you. You're afraid to have that known; you'd rather let Joel be—"

"Nancy!" Amy's voice was a lash. "You're hysterical. Stop, and listen to me."

There was a frantic knocking at the kitchen door and Amy moved quickly across the room toward it. She snapped back the bolt, and Sharon McLane slipped through the opening door. Sharon's eyes were dull and red-rimmed, and the vivacious prettiness was gone from her face. She was breathing in short gasps.

"I saw the light. Please forgive me, but I had to see you, Amy."

"Sharon, you came through the woods alone!"

"I had to come. Ward . . . he'd be furious if he knew I was here. We've had an awful fight. He mustn't know about this, Amy. But I couldn't sleep, I couldn't rest. I've got to know what you mean to do."

"Do?" Amy said. "About Joel, you mean?"

"About the land that Harvey was going to buy. Ward's land. No papers were signed, you know that. We've got no legal hold over you at all. It was only a verbal agreement between Harvey and Ward, but it was an agreement. Everyone knows about it."

She was rattling on inanely, saying lines that she apparently had rehearsed. "You're going to honor it, aren't you, you and Joel? You do feel that you should, don't you?"

Nancy looked from the pleading woman to Amy and saw that she was too shocked to speak at once. There was something frightening about Sharon McLane. It was as if a soft, playful little animal had suddenly been driven mad by desperation and was clawing wildly for its life.

"Sharon," Amy said flatly, "you're out of your mind—wanting an answer about this, at a time like this."

"I know that, I realize that, and I ask your forgiveness. But I must hear you say that you will go through with it."

"Sharon"—Amy's voice had

become gentle—"I can't make a decision like this without Joel. It's too much money for me alone to promise."

"But it isn't! It isn't so much. Not to you. You'll be rich now, you and Joel, with all of Harvey's money. Eighteen thousand dollars . . . why, for you that'll be like nothing. But for us . . . Amy, it means everything. We've counted on it, we've—"

"I know, I understand, but—"

Sharon went on as though Amy hadn't spoken. Her eyes were blazing with excitement. She was an inspired saleswoman, now wheedling, cajoling.

"Look, Amy; eighteen thousand is too much for the land, I know that. But that's all you'll have to spend on it now. It's different now that Harvey's dead. Oh, I don't blame you for fighting the deal before. I know why you did, you and Joel. Harvey would have used up thousands and thousands of dollars more, draining the lake, fixing up the old turnpike that's under it. It would have been a stupid, sinful waste of money, I agree with you. But it's not like that now. Now it's just the eighteen thousand you'll be spending. You can't be against that."

The kitchen door opened quietly, but Sharon McLane seemed to have sensed her husband's presence. She wheeled to face him, then just as quickly backed away.

He spoke sadly, reproachfully, "Sharon, you promised me. I'm ashamed of you."

"You're ashamed!" Her words were a sneer. "I'm the one who's ashamed. Coming here on my knees, begging for charity."

"Sharon! Amy, I'm sorry. You know that she doesn't mean this. She's upset, just as all of us are. She isn't greedy or heartless or—"

"Greedy!" Her laughter exploded harshly. "I'm the one who's greedy! You can say that to me. If it wasn't for your greed I wouldn't be here now. We could have sold the land months ago. Harvey offered you ten thousand for it then and I begged you to sell, I pleaded with you to sell. But you had to hold out for eighteen. You were so sure you'd get it, so sure you'd make a killing! And now Harvey's dead and we'll get nothing! Amy and Joel won't buy the land now. Why should they? We'll get nothing, not a penny."

She broke down then and the tears gushed up into her eyes. Ward was instantly beside her, his arm around her shoulders, his voice soothing. With shocking vehemence she thrust him away.

"Don't touch me," she said. "I wish I'd never seen you. I should never have—"

"Don't say it, Sharon." Ward McLane was angry now. He was no longer the pleading, painfully embarrassed husband. His sar-

casm was as cold and sharp as an icicle. "I'm tired of hearing you say that you should never have married me. It isn't news to me any more. I know who your present man-I-should-have-married is."

"You're being hateful."

"This year you're holding hands at cocktail parties with Randy Fuller."

"Randy's charming and gracious. He—"

"The whole list is charming and gracious, starting with my charming and gracious cousin."

"Leo was more than that, he meant more than that to me. Leo is strong and intelligent. He doesn't have your small-minded greediness. He would have sold the land in the beginning, he wouldn't have held out."

"Leo couldn't be bothered about the price of anything. He doesn't care about anything, or anyone."

"That isn't true! Leo does care."

"Sharon, stop. He's been gone almost ten years. In all that time I've heard from him twice. Twice in ten years. And you—you've heard nothing from him."

"Because he knew I'd married you. That's why he's stayed away. If I'd waited for him . . . Some day he'll come back and then—"

"Sharon, my dear." The angry fire had died out of Ward McLane. His voice was tired and

heartbreakingly sad. "I hope he does come back. To have him back I'd give up anything in the world. Even you, Sharon. Now let's go home."

Sharon buried her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

Amy said, "Did you drive here, Ward?"

"No, Amy."

"I'll take you both home then."

"Don't bother, please."

"She can't walk all that way, Ward. My car's out front."

Amy shepherded the McLanes out into the hallway. At the door she turned back to Nancy. "Don't wait up for me. You've got to get some rest."

Amy was right, Nancy thought grimly, she did have to get some rest. But she knew that she would wait up. She dreaded the prospect of facing Amy alone again, but it had to be done. For Joel's sake Amy had to go to the police; she had to confess to them that it was she, not Joel, who had quarreled with Harvey Worth just before his death.

She moved restlessly about the first floor of the unfamiliar house. Somewhere the servants were sleeping. She was not alone in the great, silent place; there was no reason to be jittery. But she was. She kept roaming from the front door to the kitchen door, listening, peering out into the

night, waiting for Amy to return.

At last she heard the front door open and close, and she hurried out into the hall. Joel, his dark hair rumpled, his face weary, was standing there. When he saw Nancy he straightened his shoulders and smiled at her.

"Baby," he said, "why didn't you stay home and not get mixed up in this awful mess?"

"Joel, they've let you go! That means—"

He shook his head. "It only means that I can sleep in my own room instead of a cell. I don't know why. Maybe they want me to incriminate myself even more by trying to get away."

"No, Joel! They must realize by now that you're innocent."

"Don't hope so hard, Nancy, please don't. I don't like seeing it mean so much to you, because . . . well, because I can't prove a thing. I can't prove that I wasn't driving that car, or that I wasn't fighting with Harvey."

"Joel, I—I can prove that!"

"Prove what, Nancy?"

"That it wasn't you. It was Amy, Joel. She was the one in the barn fighting with Harvey."

He didn't speak for a moment. Then he said quietly, "How do you know that?"

"She made a slip—and I—I caught her up. She's afraid to tell the police, afraid she'll get herself in trouble. But she's got to tell them—we've got to make her. If

she won't do it, I will."

"No, Nancy, you won't. You won't tell them anything."

His voice was so cold that she stepped back, almost frightened.

"Joel," she said, "it's true. Amy admitted it to me. You ask her. She'll tell you, herself."

"She doesn't have to. I knew she was there."

"You knew! But then why . . . ?"

"Because I don't want her involved. She had nothing to do with Harvey's death and I won't have her mixed up in it."

"But she is involved, can't you see that? She was with Harvey just before he died. And they were quarreling, Joel. She was begging him for money—money that she must have needed desperately—and he refused her."

"Did she tell you why she needed money, Nancy?"

"No, I—I didn't ask her."

He smiled crookedly. "She wouldn't have told you if you had. Amy's like that. But I'll tell you. She didn't need any money and she wasn't in any trouble. She was doing it for me."

"For you?"

"Yes. She made up a story about herself that she hoped would melt Harvey. Well, it didn't. You heard him. He wouldn't help her any more than he would me."

"She was trying to get money for you?"

"That's right, Nancy. I was the

one who needed money. Don't look so stricken; lots of people need money."

"Lots of people aren't being suspected of murder. Joel, do the police know about this?"

"Not yet. Nancy, it's all right. I can take care of myself."

"Are you sure you're taking care of yourself? If Amy went to the police, if she admitted she was in the barn . . .?"

"No. I won't let her do that."

"I see," Nancy said softly. "Amy must be kept out of this, no matter what it does to you. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's it exactly. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so, Joel." She turned away from him, walked to the foot of the stairs. "She . . . I think Amy's a wonderful person, too."

"Yes. She'd go to the police if I'd let her. I've made her promise that she wouldn't."

"I misjudged her. I'm sorry."

"Nancy, you shouldn't be going through all this. I've talked to the police about you. You can go home in the morning."

"Go home?"

"Yes. I've called Randy Fuller; he's going to drive you back. Good night now, Nancy."

"Good night, Joel."

"Nancy . . ."

She turned back to him. "Yes?"

"I'll see you before you leave."

"Yes. Good night, Joel."

She walked away from him, up the stairs. Her room was dark. She didn't bother to turn on the lights. Undressing quickly, she got into bed. She heard the front door open, and the murmur of voices, Joel's and Amy's. Then the sound of them drifted out of her hearing.

Almost immediately there was a sharp knocking at the front door. Nancy found herself on her feet, moving to the head of the stairs to see who it was coming to the house so long after midnight. She heard the door open and Joel speak.

"Hello, Wes. Come in."

"Thanks, Joel." Nancy recognized the voice of the young policeman. "Could I use your phone?"

"Sure," Joel said.

"What is it?" Amy asked. "What's happened?"

"Ed Hood and I found the weapon, Miss Shaw. A jack handle. We found it under some junk behind the barn."

"You're sure," Amy said, "that was what was used to . . . that it is the weapon?"

"Pretty sure. There are stains on it that look like blood. It'll have to be proved at the lab, of course, but it's the weapon, all right."

There were the clicks of a phone dial, then, and the policeman made his call. When he hung up, he said, "We're going to knock off now, Ed and I. They're

sending a car over to pick us up." "Do you and Ed want to wait up here until it comes?" Joel said. "No, thanks. I told them to pick us up at the barn. Good night."

The door was closed and Nancy heard the lock being snapped. She went back to her room, closed her door. The weapon that had murdered Harvey Worth had been found. But it would do nothing to help Joel. The murderer's fingerprints wouldn't be on it. The driver of the Stutz had been wearing goggles and a duster. Surely he had been wearing gloves, too.

If there were any prints at all on the jack handle they would be old ones—the mechanic's or Harvey Worth's—or Joel's.

Nancy heard Amy's footsteps on the stairs; then, in a moment, Joel was on his way to his room. The great mansion on the hill lay in silence at last, and now all the horror of the day flooded back.

The Stutz roaring by, Harvey Worth lying dead in the barn. The nerve-torn group that waited for the arrival of the police. The great barn plunged into darkness, the attack on her that the police believed to have been an attempt on her life.

Nancy shivered beneath the warm blankets and snuggled deeper in the bed. They were wrong, she told herself; no one had wanted to hurt her. Someone

had meant to do something under the cover of the darkness, but he hadn't tried to kill her. She had risen from the running board of the old racing car, moved a few steps forward, and she had been in his way. That was why he had hit her, hard and sharp, on her back.

She sat up straight in her bed, swung her feet to the floor. She forced her mind back to that moment before the lights had flickered and gone out.

She had been alone in that corner of the building, watching the others. From where she stood she had watched them, all of them, as they restlessly paced the floor. She had lost sight of one or another of them from time to time as they roved behind the towering cars.

But no one had approached her, no one had moved behind her. The blow had come from behind—from directly in back of her.

She knew then that she had been wrong in her reasoning. It wasn't because she had interrupted her assailant in his attempt to do something that she had been attacked. Whatever his mission was, it had already been accomplished. It was because she had interfered with him as he was trying to return from that mission, to get back into an innocent position, that he had struck her to the floor.

She tried to remember what there had been in the corner behind her.

There was the old racing car with the single mannequin stooped over one of its wheels. And that was all.

She had noticed nothing different about either the car or the figure after the lights had come on. But the killer had blown a fuse in order to get to that corner, and she had to know why.

Nancy rose and went over to her window. Across the long, shadowy lawn she could see the barn and, in front of it, the dark figures of the two policemen, their cigarette tips glowing.

She stood by the window, waiting, and in a few minutes she saw a car pull in before the barn. The two men climbed into it and the car backed out of the drive, turned, and disappeared down the hill.

She reached for her lamp, then decided against turning it on. She groped for her clothes, and dressed.

Quietly, she slipped into the hall and down the stairs. She felt her way to the front door, eased it open. Amy's car was parked beneath the portico. She ran to it, praying for a little luck, and found it. In the glove compartment there was a small flashlight.

She didn't use the light until she had rounded the corner of the barn. Then she clicked it on,

sprayed the red wall of the building with it. The barn had been closed up tight. She moved toward the small door, built into the larger ones. There was no lock on it and it opened easily.

Inside the barn she flicked her light over the cars and the mannequins that seemed to be standing guard over them. It hit the old racing car in the corner and the figure stooped beside it. She moved toward them.

Methodically, she searched the floor of the car, the running boards, the crevices of the two seats. She opened the hood, flashed her light over the engine and found nothing out of place. She turned to the mannequin then, sweeping it with light from its goggled eyes to its high buttoned shoes. She moved closer to it.

There was something about the mannequin that bothered her—and now she knew what it was.

Before, the figure had been a motoring Beau Brummel bent over a wheel in an exaggerated posture of exasperation that dramatized the endless tire trouble of the early days. It was no longer a man in frustrated inaction. Now it was a man at work. He had begun to change the tire. A tool had been lodged in his hand. Now he was using a tire iron.

Quickly, she stooped to pick up the strip of metal and she knew at once it was not a tire

iron. It was part of an old spring, the spring leaf that Charley Ball had reported stolen from the barn.

She held her light closer to the piece of steel, turning it over in her hands, and she recognized its make. It was identical in size and shape and design to the one in the car that she had helped her father restore. She knew that she would have been able to identify the old car part that had puzzled Harvey Worth. She could have told him that it had come from a Swensen Scat.

She stood looking at it, frowning, trying to understand. This spring had not been used to murder Harvey Worth—the weapon that had killed him already had been found. Was it in order to conceal this piece of worthless metal that the fuse had been blown, the barn plunged into darkness?

Was it after the spring had been hidden here that she had got in the murderer's way, and he had thrown her to the floor?

Had he risked all that in order to keep this piece of metal from being seen?

Holding the spring leaf tight, she started for the door. Joel might understand what it meant, he might be able to figure out its importance.

Halfway across the barn she stopped. Her light had picked out the tableau of mannequins on their gay Sunday outing. When

she had passed it on her way to the racer it had been a family of four—a father, a mother, two children, all in dusters, all with veils or goggles.

Now as she centered her light, she saw a fifth figure bent over in front of the tool chest on the running board, its back to her.

She told herself that she was wrong, that the fifth figure had been there all the time; it had merely escaped her notice. Her light still stoned directly on it. It was stiff and motionless, as still as the other figures in the car.

She lowered the light. The figure wore dark trousers beneath the duster. Or were they women's slacks?

She took another step toward the door and the fifth figure somehow changed. It hadn't been anything as perceptible as motion. It had been a tensing, as if now the fifth figure was set to strike, to leap out at her... Nancy stood immobilized, as frozen as the fifth figure itself. Her eyes were on its back, and again she told herself that she was mistaken, that it was only a mannequin posed beside the car.

Her imagination, twisted by the weird silence of the great gloomy barn, was betraying her into panic. The fifth figure was not a human being. She was being driven into hysteria by a bundle of wood and wax. Before she realized what she was doing,

Nancy had raised her arm and hurled the spring in her hand at the crouching figure.

The piece of metal struck the figure a glancing blow, and it swayed and froze again. And she still didn't know.

She shook the panic out of her mind. It wasn't necessary for her to pass the group of mannequins to get out of the barn. There was another door, a side door. She took a step backward, then another.

The fifth figure began to rise and turn toward her.

With a cry she swung around, running. Her hand hit the side of a car, and the flashlight was torn out of it by the impact. She groped wildly through inkky darkness and stumbled against a wall.

Behind her she could hear a frantic rush of movement, not coming toward her, but driving toward the side door of the barn. She plunged along the wall, knowing that she must be the first to reach the door.

She smashed into the side of a car and fell to her knees. She pulled herself to her feet and moved forward again. Her hand found the smooth wood of the door.

She opened it and slipped through, jerking it closed behind her. The handle was caught on the inside, the door held open. She could hear a gasping for

breath that was not her own.

Letting go of the door, she hurried herself down the steps. Her feet hit the lawn and she ran for the shelter of the woods that lay beyond it. Leaves and branches slapped at her face, the underbrush tore at her legs. Abruptly she stumbled onto a path. She raced along it for a moment, then swerved back into the brush.

She could hear a wild thrashing that was coming closer to her. Then the thrashing stopped and there were quick footsteps on the path. Holding her breath, she crouched down to the ground, pressing herself deep into the thick weeds.

The footsteps moved past her, thudding on the hard dirt. She crawled out into the path, moving cautiously back toward the barn.

Then she was leaving the barn behind her and racing for the house, which was silhouetted now against a graying sky. A light shone from a kitchen window and she rushed toward it. A startled maid turned away from the stove as Nancy burst through the kitchen door.

"Miss Carter! What is it?"  
"Joel! I've got to see Joel!"  
"Nobody's up yet but me, Miss Carter."

Nancy ran past her, into the hall and up the stairway. She started down the corridor toward Joel's room. A door beside her

opened and Amy, still dressed in the white jacket and slacks, stepped into her path.

"Nancy!"  
"I've got to see Joel. I've got to talk to him."

She tried to brush past Amy, but the tall girl blocked her way. She said, "You can't see him now, Nancy; he's sleeping."

With a sudden, quick movement Nancy slipped past her, ran to Joel's door, knocked loudly.

"Joel," she called, "it's Nancy."

Behind her, Amy's voice was sharp and cold. "You're being thoughtless."

Nancy turned the knob, thrust open the door. The light from the corridor fell across a neatly made bed, an empty room. She turned slowly back to face Amy.

"Where is he?" she said. "Where has he gone?"

"I don't know. I thought—"

"You do know. You tried to keep me from finding out that he wasn't here. Amy, tell me where he is."

For a moment the tall girl wavered. She said, "Nancy, I—" She stopped, and her lips closed in a tight, hard line. She said, "I've told you I don't know." She turned away from Nancy and started back toward her room. At the doorway she stopped. "Nancy," she said, "I think you ought to try to get some rest. Randy Fuller's coming early this morning to take you home."

Amy closed her door after her, and Nancy heard the click of a lock. She walked slowly down the hall to her own room . . .

It was nine thirty and Nancy still stood before her bedroom window, watching the driveway below. A few minutes before she had seen Ward McLane drive up the hill in his car and enter the house. Now another car was swinging in beside McLane's. She couldn't see the driver clearly and for a moment she thought it was Joel. But it was Randy Fuller who jumped out of the car and ran up the front steps.

She turned away from the window and started down the stairs. She was going to tell Randy Fuller that he wouldn't be taking her home after all, that she wasn't leaving this house until Joel had been cleared of the charge of murder.

She found Randy alone in the living room. He glanced at her and nodded, but he didn't speak. His eyes moved back to the half-opened door of the study through which they could hear the soft, plaintive voice of Ward McLane.

"I've been so afraid something like this might happen," he was saying. "Amy, you know Sharon, how unreasonable she is. I almost knew that she'd leave me after this."

"She'll come back, Ward," Amy said. Her voice was consoling.

"After a while she'll realize—"

"I'm not sure. She's fed up with me, Amy, and I don't blame her. I've made so many mistakes during our marriage. And now the land...she'd counted so much on that money. She begged me to sell it long ago, but I kept holding out for more."

"You wanted it for her sake, Ward. She knows that."

"Yes, she must know. And if Harvey had lived, I would have got my price. I would have proved to her that for once in my life I'd been right. But there's no good talking about it now. Amy, if she gets in touch with you, you'll let me know at once? I've got to see her again."

The heavy knocker bounced a noisy summons on the front door and Randy Fuller rose quickly to his feet.

"I'll get it," he said.

Nancy followed him to the hallway arch. He opened the door for Wexford's Chief of Police and a uniformed State Trooper.

Kroll said, "Amy's expecting us. I talked to her on the phone a little while ago. This is Lieutenant Foley."

The two policemen walked past Nancy into the living room. Amy and Ward McLane had come out of the study and stood waiting.

Kroll said, "Joel back yet, Amy?"

She shook her head. "No, not yet."

"He's been gone quite a while."

"Not so long." She shot one quick glance at Nancy, then her eyes went back to the policeman and her voice was calm and casual. "He just went for a walk after breakfast, as I told you. He's been gone only a little more than an hour."

"We've been looking for him longer than that," the State Trooper said brusquely. He nodded at Nancy. "Is this Miss Carter?"

"Yes. I'm Nancy Carter."

"You got any ideas about your car?"

"My car? The Scat?"

"That's right."

Amy said quickly, "She doesn't know about it yet, Lieutenant. She just came down. I haven't had a chance to tell her."

She turned to Nancy. "Your car's gone, Nancy. This morning when Charley Ball went to tow it out of the ditch, it wasn't there."

"You mean he couldn't find it?"

Foley said, "No, that's not what she means. The mechanic found your overnight bag; it had been thrown in the ditch along with your duster and your hat. And he found where your car had been, all right. But the car itself had been stolen."

"But why?" Nancy said. "Why would anyone take it?"

"It's worth a lot of money?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It's quite old, you know, and very rare. So few of them were made that they're valuable."

"How valuable?" Foley asked.  
"I don't know exactly. My father paid almost two thousand for his. But it had to be completely restored, and that cost a lot. I couldn't guess how much it's worth now."

"Wait a minute," Kroll said. He stepped toward Ward McLane. "Leo Frayne sold his Scat after he'd restored it. How much did he get for it, Ward?"

"Leo Frayne?" the Trooper asked.

"My cousin," Ward said. "Yes, he sold his about ten years ago to a collector in Ohio... Akron. He wrote me about the price. It was more than five thousand."

Foley whistled softly. "Five thousand? That's enough money for someone to risk—"

"But it isn't," Ward said. "There's no way of cashing in on it. A Scat is such an oddity that it couldn't be sold—it would be recognized immediately. I can't believe that the car was stolen."

Randy Fuller rose from a window seat. "Then why was it taken? Where is it?"

"Maybe," Foley said, "Joel could tell us that."

Amy's face went white. "You don't mean—you can't be thinking that Joel—"

Kroll said, "Where is Joel?"

"I've told you. He went for a walk."

"It's a long walk, Amy."

"Too long," Foley said. "I don't like it. Maybe he's walked right out of the state."

"He hasn't run away," Amy said. "I promise you he'll come back!"

"We won't take any chances," Foley said. "I'm going to put his description on the wire. If he has wandered away, he'll be picked up. If you'll tell me where the phone is, I'll—"

"Don't bother," said a voice from the archway.

Joel walked into the room. He was disheveled and pale, weary to the dropping point. He moved to the long oak table, leaned against it, facing the two policemen.

Kroll said, "Where have you been, Joel?"

Amy said, "I've told them, I—" "Let him tell us, Amy."

Joel was looking at Amy. He said, "I'm going to tell them, Amy. I went to see Larry."

Amy stepped toward him beseechingly, but Kroll's voice stopped her. "Who's Larry, Joel?"

"A friend of mine, Larry Owen. He lives in New London. I've just been up there to see him." He took a deep breath and spoke rapidly. "Last year when I needed a new press and linotype machine for my printing business, Larry lent me the money. A month ago

Larry himself got into a financial jam. He has to have the money back."

"And you thought it was necessary to see this Owen about your loan last night? You'll have to think of something better than that, Joel." Kroll's voice was sarcastic.

"It was about the note for the loan, wasn't it, Joel?" Amy said swiftly. She turned to Kroll. "Joel was protecting me. I insisted on co-signing the note for the money. And now I suppose Joel thought it would be better if Owen didn't volunteer anything about my responsibility for the money."

"We'll check on those signatures later," Kroll said. "Tell me, Joel, what if you couldn't pay the loan back—what would that mean?"

"Everything," Joel said grimly. "The works. I'd lose the business."

"You tried to get the money from Harvey, of course."

"Yes. He didn't think I was any better risk than the banks around here do."

"But now that he's dead," Foley cut in, "you've got all the money you need."

"That's right," Joel said quietly.

"And yesterday afternoon you made one last try to get the money from him. When he refused again you lost your temper."

"No!" Amy cried. "That wasn't Joel in the barn with Harvey!"

"Amy," Joel said, "don't—"

"I've got to, Joel! Can't you see that they're convinced you're guilty?" She turned to the old policeman. "Mr. Kroll, I was the one fighting with Harvey, asking him for money."

"She was doing it for me," Joel said.

"But don't you understand?" Amy pleaded. "Joel wasn't in the barn! The murderer came in after I left."

"You saw him, Amy?" Kroll said. "You saw that it wasn't Joel?"

"No," Amy said, "I didn't see anyone, I—"

Foley interrupted her impatiently. "Joel needed money, and now, because his uncle is dead, he's got it. I think he'd better call his lawyer, and then he's coming with me."

Nancy stepped in front of the state trooper. "I've got to see Joel alone first, just for a minute."

"Why?" Foley asked flatly.

"There's something I must tell him."

"You can tell us, too."

"No—I—"

Joel said, "Go ahead, Nancy; it's all right. What is it?"

"It's about something I found. I wanted to tell you first, Joel. I don't know what it means and I—I was afraid it might be one more thing against you."

"What did you find, Miss Carter?" Kroll asked, his voice kind.

"The old spring leaf that Charley said was stolen. It was put in a mannequin's hand—the one that's fixing a tire—so that it looked like a tire iron that belonged there. I can't see why it's important—it's just part of a spring from a Seac—but it must be. That's why the fuse was blown last night—to hide the spring leaf, not to murder me. And when I found it, there was someone in the barn, watching me. Someone who came after me, tried to get me. This time I think whoever it was did mean to kill me."

"Nancy," Joel said, "it was a spring leaf from a Seac? You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Not one from your own car?"

"Yes. Ours are all shined up. This one is rusty from being in the mud. It was the one the boys found by the lake."

"We can figure this out later," Foley said. He walked to Joel, put his hand on his arm. "Right now let's get moving."

"Wait," Joel said. "Give me a minute, just a minute!"

He circled the room and stopped before the window seat where Ward McLane and Randy Fuller sat. Abruptly, he said, "Ward, why wouldn't you sell your land to Harvey?"

Ward looked at him in surprise. "But I did agree to sell it, you know that. If Harvey hadn't been killed—"

"Months ago," Joel said, "Harvey offered you ten thousand for it—a fantastic price. Why didn't you take it?"

"I thought he wanted it enough to pay more. And I was right. He agreed to buy at eighteen."

"There might have been another reason for your holding out, Ward."

"Another reason? I don't understand."

"You knew what Harvey planned to do with the land, didn't you?"

"Of course, everyone knew. He was going to restore the section of old turnpike."

"And that meant draining the lake."

"Naturally," Ward said.

"I don't think you wanted that lake drained."

"Why not?" he looked up at Joel and his eyes were bewildered. "What difference could that make to me?"

"This," Joel said. "That spring leaf Nancy identified as belonging to a Seac came out of the lake. You know how few of those cars were ever made, how rare they were. Leo had one. What happened to his Seac, Ward?"

"We were just talking about it, Joel, before you came. He sold it to some man out in Akron; you remember that, don't you? He drove it out there to him."

"That's what you've been saying all these years. It's strange

that none of us ever heard from Leo after that."

"I heard from him. He wrote me after he sold his car."

"Ward, is Leo dead? Is that why you wouldn't sell the land? Because you knew what would be found at the bottom of the lake when it was drained?"

The portly little man's eyes blinked incredulously at Joel. "Do you know what you're saying? No, you can't!"

"I think that Leo and his car are at the bottom of that lake, and that's why you couldn't sell the land. You asked eighteen thousand for it, but you never dreamed that Harvey was so fanatical about his hobby he'd pay that much. But when he finally agreed, then you had to sell. And you planned to murder Harvey after you got your money—but before he drained the lake."

"Joel, this is idiotic! Harvey was murdered *before* I got the money! His death cheated me of eighteen thousand dollars! Why would I have—?"

"You had to, Ward. Because Nancy arrived yesterday in a Scat and you saw her drive up the hill. You knew that Harvey would show her the spring leaf, and she would identify it for him. Or if that didn't happen right away, Harvey would see the springs on her Scat when he pored over it as he did over every old car. And then he would realize, just as I

have, what happened to Leo Frayne. That's why you drove Nancy into the ditch. You had to delay her getting to Harvey. You had to get to him first."

"Joel, you're accusing me of murder!"

"Yes, you murdered Harvey. But you couldn't find the spring leaf because Charley hadn't put it back in the wall case. And you didn't have time to hunt for it. Nancy had come into the barn, and you had to get away. Then later, while we were waiting for the police, you saw it and you knew you had to get rid of it. You were afraid to just take it... the police might search us or someone might notice that you were carrying a strip of metal in your duster pocket. So you hid it temporarily in the mannequin's hand, and went back last night to get it."

"Joel, you're just guessing—"

"No, it all makes sense. And Nancy's car... you had to get rid of it, too, before Charley or someone saw the springs on it and realized that they were the same as the one found by the lake. Where is Nancy's car, Ward? Is it at the bottom of the lake with Leo's?"

"This is all crazy! You've no proof."

"Ward, the lake is going to be drained. If the police won't have it done, I will."

Slowly Ward McLane sank

down on the window seat. Randy Fuller got up, moved away from him. No one spoke; there was a wall of silence around him. He looked up at last, his eyes glazed.

"I didn't mean to kill Leo, it was an accident . . . a quarrel over Sharon. But I was afraid that no one . . . that they wouldn't believe me. I chained him to the Scat before I—I pushed it in the lake. That's when the spring must have broken. I thought I was safe forever. How could I know that Harvey would want to buy the land, drain the lake? He forced me to kill him!"

His voice rose as he turned to Nancy. "And you . . . you forced me to try to kill you! If you'd stayed out of it . . . I was going to get rid of the Scat when I saw the police leave the barn. I thought I could get the spring leaf out of it then, and I would have . . . except for you, nobody would ever have known."

He took a step toward Nancy, but the State Trooper was moving in on him. He rushed futilely at the policeman, screaming.

Nancy turned away. She felt Joel's arm around her, drawing her quickly from the room . . .

It was a new car, modern as next year, that rolled through the afternoon sun, speeding away from Wexford. Nancy's swiveling sideways in her seat to face Joel behind the wheel.

"Joel," Nancy said.

"Yes?"

"I'll never forgive myself for judging Amy. Murder twists you, make you do strange things. Amy was always trying to help you. She's wonderful, Joel."

"Sure, she is. My kids will be lucky . . . having Amy for an aunt."

"An aunt?"

"Well, technically, a step-aunt once removed."

"Oh," Nancy said. "I thought when you stopped seeing me that—that there was someone else. And when I met Amy, I was sure."

Joel smiled. "I never stopped seeing you, Nancy. I got so involved with the business, with trying to pay that loan back. I was in trouble, Nancy."

"You should have told me. Maybe I could have helped."

"From now on you'll hear all my troubles."

The car slowed down for a small town's traffic. It stopped at a red light at the main intersection. A policeman came around to Nancy's side of the car. He was grinning.

"Say, miss, what happened to that old car you drove through here yesterday?"

"It's at the bottom of a lake," Nancy said.

The policeman nodded in understanding. "Good place for it," he said.

# Lawrence Treat

## H As in Holdup

*The way Inspector Mitch Taylor put it, the Homicide Squad was the guardian angel of all the neckers in town—which, come to think of it, sure was an odd duty for any harassed Homicide Squad. Another police procedural by America's Mr. Procedural himself . . .*

### Detectives: MITCH TAYLOR and the HOMICIDE SQUAD

THE HOMICIDE SQUAD WAS having it easy that spring. They handled all crimes of violence out here, and for a while the robberies were run-of-the-mill and stayed off the front page. The only real homicide case they had was that barroom brawl where everybody saw who done it and told the cops right off. Then the warm weather set in and this guy they got to call Tiny Tim showed up.

They called him that on account people said he was big—say, eight or ten feet tall, and weighed around a ton. Which, as far as getting the dope from witnesses was concerned, was about par for the course. Anyhow, he specialized in robbing couples that parked where they thought nobody would bother them.

He had a gun and he'd pulled two holdups so far, both of them

on those river overlooks, and it seemed like he was in business for the summer. Lieutenant Decker had a policewoman and a detective staked out and he figured it was only a matter of time before they got him. Still, having Tiny Tim around loose was no picnic.

Mitch Taylor, Homicide, wasn't thinking of Tiny Tim that morning. About all Mitch had on his mind when he got on the bus was Amy and how she'd been shining all over when she'd kissed him goodbye. And why she'd ever hooked up with a goof like him, he'd never figured out.

Still, here he was, five-nine in height and on the chesty side, what with how his rib cage curved out. Those long lashes of his made his brown eyes look soft, which they were in a way. And at the same time, they weren't.

He got to headquarters at nine. A couple of the gang were in the Squad Room and Mitch said hello and kidded around a little. Some shop talk and who had a chance to win the pennant and whether the mayor was still playing around with that new babe of his. Then the Lieutenant came in and they got down to business.

The Lieutenant was a tall gray-haired guy with gray eyes and slap-bang energy that never gave out, and he ran his bunch like he owned them. Just tell them what to do. Wrap up a homicide, make an arrest, bring in a punk who was too handy with a switchblade, get a sample of the moon, report back at five, see you tomorrow.

There wasn't much stuff this morning—nothing to get excited about except that Tiny Tim had been busy last night, and this time he'd made quite a haul. He took a \$20,000 necklace from a Mrs. Gwen Curtiss, along with a few odd bucks. She'd put in the complaint at 2 a.m., not much in the way of details, here was the report, and Mitch Taylor could investigate.

Mitch looked it over. Whoever had made it out must have typed with one foot and fallen asleep halfway down the page. And what was more, besides all the bum spelling and the stuff that was left out, you could hardly even read the name and address, with

that worn-out typewriter ribbon they'd used. Mitch studied it out and wondered who was pocketing the dough that was supposed to go for new ribbons.

After the briefing was finished and the meeting broke up, Mitch ambled over to the Lieutenant and tapped the report. "This thing don't even say who she was with," Mitch observed. "Think she put her best jewelry on and went necking all by herself?"

"Find out," Decker said, chuckling, "and try to size her up. Twenty grand is a lot of moolah, so the insurance people will probably go to town on this. But there's probably not much we can do except get a description."

"Sure," Mitch said, with a kind of contentment in his soul. Because with the Lieutenant, you never knew if he was going to drive you like he was trying to show up the F.B.I., or if you could just blow dust. And this time it was just dust.

Mitch got into his squad car, Number Four, and drove up to the Curtiss address on Stowe. The only parking space on the block was in the full sun, so he stopped there and then called the despatcher to say he was leaving the car. He locked it, stepped out, and took a gander at the street.

Nobody around here was suffering; and the Curtiss house—stucco with brown beams

showing to make it look English or something—cost maybe around forty grand, say the price of a couple of necklaces. But what the hell—this was a routine investigation, ask the necessaries and then kiss it off. So Mitch walked up the path, rang the bell, and stood there waiting.

The blonde who opened the door was in her late twenties, maybe, and you could tell she'd been chased plenty and usually got caught. But this morning she looked as if she'd been crying. Maybe because she loved that necklace so much.

Mitch said, "Mrs. Curtiss?" She said yes, in a low, throaty voice, that made him gulp. He said, "I'm Inspector Taylor." He took out his identification and showed it to her.

"Won't you come in?" she said, like she was inviting him to stay for the week-end.

He nodded and went past her into the living room, which Amy would have pulled apart and thrown out all that expensive stuff with the brand-new polish, and made into a place where you could sit down and be comfortable. A guy was standing near a window, a dark, flashy, take-charge guy, and Mitch wondered what he'd been making her cry about.

The guy turned around and said, "Taylor? We never met, but I've heard about you. I'm Slater.

From the insurance company."

"Glad to know you," Mitch said. When it came to dough, the insurance people were right on the ball, except you had to watch out for these investigators; they were sometimes a little slippery.

So Mitch turned to the Curtiss dame and said, "I got the report here. It says you were parked at Smith's Point when this guy came along and shoved a gun at you and took a necklace and forty-five dollars. Is that right?"

"Yes. He had a flashlight, and he blinded me with it."

"What did he look like?" Mitch asked.

"She couldn't see," Slater said. "She just told you she was blinded by the light."

"Sure," Mitch said. He took out his pad, and he spoke to the Curtiss female. "How tall would you say he was?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I was too upset to notice, I was afraid he'd shoot, but he just reached through the open window and tore off my necklace."

"Then what?" Mitch asked.

"Then," she said, "I fainted."

"Who was with you?"

"My husband," she said, like she'd been saving that one up for the knockout. But Mitch rolled with the punch.

"What's his name?" he asked. "Where is he?"

"Edwin Curtiss, and he left town this morning on a business

trip. He was angry at me for wearing the necklace and making him park there. It was my idea. He didn't want to. He—" She gulped, caught her breath, and tried to choke back a sob.

"Mrs. Curtiss has had a nasty experience," Slater said, butting in. "The doctor was here earlier and he advised her to rest. I have all the information you want, so you can get it from me."

"Okay," Mitch said. "What did the guy look like?"

Slater gave with a funny kind of laugh and said, "How would I know? I wasn't there."

"She was," Mitch said, and turned to her again. "What did he look like, huh? For instance; was he tall?"

She shook her head and said, "I don't know. I told you—I didn't see him."

Mitch gave her the eye until she started to squirm, and then he said, "Could I use your phone?"

She pointed to the other end of the room and he went there and lifted the thing up and dialed his own number. It was kind of a trick he pulled, sometimes. You stood with your back to whoever it was, but you picked a spot where you could see their reflection in a window or a hunk of glass over a picture. Then you made your call and kept your voice low so it couldn't be heard.

They always figured you'd

found out something and were reporting it. And with two people like this, if they'd cooked up a story, they'd grab a chance to get their signals straight. You could tell, every time.

So Mitch called his number and Amy answered, and he spoke in a low voice and kept the phone close to his mouth. He asked Amy what they were having for dinner tonight, and she said it was a surprise and where was he. He told her he was in a joint where they probably owed on the furniture, which was brocaded up like a king getting coronated.

While he talked he could see Slater and the Curtiss female go into a huddle, and Slater was telling her something and she kept nodding her head and looking at Mitch like she was worried. Then she left and went upstairs, and Slater picked up a cigarette box and a lighter and lit up, and moved out of sight.

When Mitch finished up, Slater was sitting in the red chair like it was his favorite spot and he'd rented it for the season.

Mitch asked him about Curtiss, and Slater said the guy went around the country buying up options for oil and mineral rights; and if he worked it right he'd start a real estate boom and unload. Sucker stuff, but strictly legal.

Mitch listened, but this was no skin off his nose. All he wanted

now was a description of the jewels, and when he got it he blew. He had an idea that as soon as the door closed, this Curtiss dame came flying downstairs. Or maybe Slater went up. Anyhow, Mitch drove back to headquarters and made his report.

"This Slater guy," Mitch told the Lieutenant, "is making a play for her. Maybe he's just stringing her along—she's a nice piece of fluff and her husband's away a lot and Slater maybe sees a chance for himself. On the other hand, it could be *versa vice*. Maybe there never was a robbery and the Curtisses are trying to put something over on the insurance company, and she's playing him."

"Think she really was with her husband?" Decker asked.

"That's her story, and she was saving it up. There's something fishy about the whole thing, but I want to see Curtiss before I start guessing."

"Well, we'll have to wait for him to get back," Decker said. "Can you tie Tiny Tim into this?"

"Sounds like him," Mitch said. A few days later Curtiss showed up at headquarters by request, and then left town again. Mitch wasn't around but the Lieutenant questioned him and gave him a clean bill on the robbery business. Curtiss told the same story as his wife, and you couldn't trip him up.

So nothing in particular was happening, except the Lieutenant was still worried about keeping the city safe for Romeos. The way Mitch put it, the Homicide Squad was their guardian angel and had to make Tiny Tim lay off.

He laid off all right. He picked the wrong guy and got shot. Nobody saw it happen except the couple he must have tried to hold up, and they kept it a secret. Next morning a pair of patrol cops spotted a car in the woods a little off the road and they investigated. After looking around, they found a big guy with a bullet in his head. A flashlight was alongside him, and he was still holding onto his gun.

The spot was inside the city limits, so the Homicide Squad took over. They didn't know it was Tiny Tim, not yet, but they suspected it was. His driver's license said William Roush and he lived in a rooming house and was wearing an expensive wrist watch. Later on in the day his first hold-up victim identified the watch. So everything was hunky-dory for the neckers again.

It was easy to reconstruct what had happened. The neighborhood was a well-known spooning place, and Tiny Tim must have driven out there in the evening and waited for a pair of customers to park and switch off their lights. Then Tiny Tim probably walked

over and demanded their cash and valuables. Only this time the driver was armed, and he shot Tiny Tim and beat it.

"Like Decker," said, "the killer could probably have pleaded self-defense and got away with it, but he preferred to vamoose. So, what with Tiny Tim out of the way and nobody crying about it, and with a good chance that it was self-defense, the squad could go a little easy on the case. They didn't expect to crack it, and for once the papers wouldn't be on their necks, saying a dangerous killer was loose and that the police were doing nothing."

The investigation was thorough enough and the Homicide Squad went into Tiny Tim's background and found he had a record going way back, but the pressure was off. Until the M.E. dug a second bullet out of the corpse and said Tiny Tim had been carrying it around for a few years. Then Jub Freeman, up in the laboratory, said it came from the same gun that had killed him last night.

With that, the Lieutenant ordered all Homicide Squad members to report in the Squad Room immediately. When they were there, he lined things up for them.

"Tiny Tim is William Roush, and he served time for assault and robbery. Five years ago he was shot in the leg, was hospitalized, and refused to tell who'd clipped him.

"Nothing too unusual about that. If Roush had snitched, the snitcheree probably had enough on Roush to send him to jail, too. So we got nowhere, then. But this snitcheree waited five years, and last night he set up a trap and Tiny Tim walked into it. Our job is to backtrack on Tiny Tim and find this guy. Here's what we do."

The Lieutenant handed out the work assignments. Tiny Tim's room, his letters, photographs, all physical evidence. His bank account, if he had one, his car purchase and all financial records that could be located. The neighborhood where he lived, visit the bars, speak to everybody who knew him. His prison record and prison contacts, track them down, talk to his parole officer. His women. His family, if any. Trace his movements in detail for the last couple of days. And so on.

It was a tough week for Mitch Taylor. Besides working like a toll collector in the rush hour, he had family worries. Joey, who was six, got to playing "detective" and imitating his old man. The kid would follow people to make what he called "a-rest." After he got lost the first time, Mitch spread the word to the local precinct to watch out for Joey and bring him home whenever they spotted him.

It happened again, twice, so Mitch gave the kid a man-to-man talk, how Joey could be a detec-

tive when he grew up, but right now he had to stay home and take care of his mother, and he mustn't leave the house. So the next day Joey went up to the roof of the apartment house where they lived. Somebody saw him walking along the edge, six stories up, and Amy almost died before she got there and brought him down.

Joey was proud of the exploit; he said he liked high places, he could see a lot. Mitch and Amy decided not to bawl the kid out, they'd only scare him. He was better off keeping his nerve, only Amy would have to watch him like a hawk. Which was tough on her and maybe why she burned that rhubarb pie, which was Mitch's favorite.

Then one evening she had a funny story. "A man came here today," she said, "and he told me he was doing research on housewives and he wanted to know how I spent my day and when I went out and if it was at regular times, and so on. He asked me so many questions."

"Did he have any identification?" Mitch asked.

"No. He said he usually did but he'd mislaid it, and he gave me a peculiar look. As if he wanted me to be suspicious. As if he wanted to scare me."

"Look, honey, if he comes around again, call the cops."

"He won't come back," Amy

said with positiveness. "Whatever he wanted to know, he found out."

"Daddy," Joey said, jumping up and down. "Can I make him a rest?"

"Who?" Mitch asked.

"The bad man."

"Where is he?" Mitch asked. "Did you follow him?"

"He went up," Joey said. And more than that Mitch couldn't get out of the kid. So what do you do, huh?

Down at the Homicide Squad, however, things were moving along. The picture of a man named Andy Jones began to emerge. He'd been a pal of Tiny Tim's at one time. Andy was one of those guys you can never get a description of that amounts to anything, but he was smart, and he liked women and fancy jewelry and fast cars. He was either in the big money or else he was broke, but nobody knew exactly what he did. He was everything, he was nothing. He favored blondes, and he'd had one in particular for quite a while. A couple of people thought he'd been married to her. But who he was and where he was, the Homicide Squad couldn't find out.

At the back of his mind Mitch was still wondering about the Curtiss female and why she'd run out on him that morning. And why she'd been crying. And whether a dame like her would

faint just because Tiny Tim grabbed her necklace, and whether she'd really had a doctor the next morning.

And seeing as how Mitch was the only one who'd questioned her, he figured he ought to talk to her again. So he kept dropping in whenever he was near Stowe, but without much luck.

It must have been the fourth time he tried that the garage door was open and he saw the lowslung, red sports car. And make believe that didn't give Mitch a couple of ideas.

She was home this time and she acted kind of nervous, but who wouldn't be when a homicide dick keeps coming around? Mitch told himself that if she'd dyed her hair and kept the garage door closed, maybe he never would have caught on.

He sat down in the same chair that Slater the insurance guy liked so much, and the cigarette box was there and Mitch slid it over. While he didn't smoke, he wanted to see the initials on it. They were the curlicue kind that nobody can read, but if you decided the letters were G.J., you could make them out.

He sparred around a while and asked her about her husband and whether she'd collected for the necklace yet, and he had her up in the air and hanging by her teeth before he shot the real question.

"When did your husband

change his name?" he asked.

She popped up like she'd been goosed, and she dug her fingernails into her palms before she managed to answer. "He never did."

"Changed it from Andy Jones," Mitch remarked.

"Oh!" she said. "He—" Then she caught herself and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Mitch figured she wasn't too bright. "Just tell me," he said. "He's in a little trouble, and you want to be on the right side of the fence, don't you?"

When she didn't say anything, Mitch went on. "It's easy to find out," he said. "All I got to do is check up on the marriage license. Nothing to it."

"I married Ed two years ago," she said. "Ed Curtiss."

"And what about this?" Mitch said, tapping the cigarette box. "G.J.—Gwen Jones."

"Johnson," she said. "That was my name before I got married."

Maybe, Mitch thought, and maybe not; but he didn't push it. The thing was, he had a lead on Andy Jones and the next move was hers; so let her think he knew a lot more than he actually did.

He stood up. "I'll find out," he said. "I have a couple more questions, but they can wait. I'll be seeing you." And he started to go.

Her voice, sharp and panicky

made him swing around. "Please!" she said.

She was standing there with her arms at her sides and her palms turned out, like she didn't know what to do with her hands. "What kind of trouble is he in?" she said.

"Ask him," Mitch said. "Where is he, anyhow? Upstairs?"

The question was way off. Instead of scaring her, it made her wonder what Mitch was talking about. He figured he should have shut up and that he wasn't likely to get any further, so he just turned around and went out. And walked down the street. And around the corner. And then doubled back through somebody's back yard and slipped into his squad car, which was unmarked. He kept his head down so she couldn't see him.

He could tell by the roar of the motor when the red sports car came scooting out of the garage. It went east, and he turned on the ignition and followed. He could see the red job a couple of blocks away; and he stayed far enough back so she couldn't possibly spot him.

At the traffic circle she'd either go downtown, or else she'd take Lincoln and follow it as far as Lanier. And if she did neither, then she was playing rings around him and he'd messed this up and the Lieutenant would say so, with embellishments.

She took Lincoln.

The way she'd parked the red sports car on Lanier, she could have got a ticket. But she was jittery and hardly knew what she was doing. She wanted help and to be told what to do.

Mitch parked out of sight, and while he was waiting there he called headquarters and asked them to check with the Marriage Bureau, just in case. Andrew Jones and Gwendolyn somebody, date unknown. It took about a half hour before they called him back and said there was no such record.

Mitch wasn't disturbed. Maybe she'd been married to Andy Jones and maybe not, but she certainly knew him. And she was in that whitebrick apartment house and repeating what Mitch had said. Which was fine, because once he tied her up with Jones, the rest would be easy.

So Mitch sat in his car and thought about Amy and then about Joey and then a'out nothing in particular. And then he got practically an inspiration.

Another half hour or so went by before Gwen came out and got into the red car and drove off. Mitch went to the apartment house and looked through the names in the lobby and found Slater. He lived in 3-C, and Mitch pushed the button. The buzzer answered and he opened the main door and went up.

Slater was waiting. Mitch stepped past him and into a comfortably furnished room that had color TV and a good hi-fi system. Slater closed the door.

"Hi, Andy," Mitch said. That was the inspiration.

Slater smiled. "I've been expecting you," he said. He brought the gun out in a quick, expert motion. "Put your hands up and turn around," Slater said.

Mitch obeyed. Slater said, "Now take your jacket off, slowly."

Mitch took it off. He didn't think he was going to get shot. Not by a guy like Slater, who was familiar with police work and knew Mitch must have reported where he was. Still, Mitch shouldn't have come here alone, and he was in one hell of a mess and didn't know how he was going to get out of it.

Slater moved in, took hold off the holster strap, and yanked it off. The holstered gun dropped to the floor and Slater picked it up. When he told Mitch to turn around again, Slater was relaxed in the easy chair and smiling. He had both guns.

"Sit down," he said, "and take a load off your feet."

"Sure," Mitch said. "Just so you don't do anything stupid."

"I never do," Slater said. "That's the point. I've been worried about the way you people were closing in on me, but I

figured I was all right as long as nobody pumped Gwen. Then you had to stick your nose in."

"You sure you want to tell me all this?" Mitch said. "Maybe we'd both be better off if we called it quits."

Slater shook his head. "Too late for that. My best bet is to give it to you straight, and then make a deal."

Mitch felt a little better. If he stalled along for a while, he might get out of this mess. And as soon as he was clear of it, he'd tell the Lieutenant, including any deal Mitch had to make. So he said, "Well, maybe."

"In the old days," Slater said, "Roush and I pulled quite a few jobs together."

Mitch nodded. "Until you had an argument and shot him."

"That's right," Slater said. "We split up after that and I started a new life. No more Jones. Instead, Slater, insurance investigator, with a clean bill."

"But you kept up with Gwen," Mitch said.

"The hell I did. I walked out on her and never expected to see her again. Or Roush, either. I thought he was still a guest of the state, or I'd never have come near this town."

"They let 'em out too easy," Mitch said.

"I met him in a bar," Slater said, "and he tried to put the bite on me. I saw I had to cut

him down before he opened that big mouth of his."

Mitch asked.

"And what about Gwen?"

"Part of my job is to spot phony claims. You learn to smell 'em, and when I got one from a Mrs. Edward Curtiss about a stolen necklace, I went to see her. It was Gwen and the claim was as phony as they come. It was a necklace I'd given her, and she'd kept it all these years. It cost two grand, but I'd manufactured a bill for twenty, and that's what she'd insured it for."

"So you arranged a fake robbery," Mitch said. "Right?"

"I didn't fake anything," Slater said angrily. "I told Gwen to wear the necklace and park at Smith's Point. I stuck them up and there was no kidding about it, either. Curtiss wasn't in on it and doesn't know yet that there's a big insurance claim, which I'm going to collect. And keep. I wanted him to be telling the truth. An insurance company doesn't pay out twenty grand without knowing everything's clean and aboveboard. The robbery had to be genuine, and the police investigation had to be, too."

"So that was it," Mitch said. "Wait for us to tag Roush with your job, and then you'd knock him off. You planned doing that, anyhow. And you might have gotten away with it if I hadn't tumbled to you. Now what?"

"Now," Slater said, "we make a deal. I want you to shut up about this for a month, while I collect the twenty grand. If you keep your trap shut that long, you'll have to keep it shut. You can't go and tell that chief of yours that you had the goods on me and let me go. You see that, don't you?"

Mitch nodded. But what made Slater think Mitch would go for the deal?

"All I need is a month," Slater said. "Maybe I'll stick around after that, or maybe I'll cover my tracks and change my name again and go somewhere else. I did it once, I know how. Jones to Slater, then Slater to—" Slater grinned.

"Don't tell me," Mitch said. "Let me guess."

"One month," Slater said. "Naturally, I want to make sure you don't rat on me, so I set things up a week ago. If you arrest me, something's going to happen to your wife. You don't know what and you don't know when, and you can't take a chance that I'm bluffing. But if I'm in jail, it's going to happen. And don't kid yourself—the day I don't tell my boy that everything's okay, he goes to work."

Mitch thought of the guy who had visited Amy, and it seemed pretty clear that Slater had hired him and that this was no bluff. But how do you protect your wife from a hood who has everything

fixed and ready to go, as soon as he gets the order?

You don't. You knuckle under.

"One month," Slater said again. "At the end of it all bets are off between us. Either I'll be okay, or else I'll be in jail on two murder charges—and you'll have a dead wife."

Mitch didn't say anything. Slater smiled like he knew he'd won and he said, "So you'll report a clean bill for the Curtisses and for me. I think that takes care of everything."

"Yeah," Mitch said.

"Okay, then. Pick up your gun and get out of here."

Mitch picked it up, slipped the holster strap over his shoulder, and put on his jacket. He kept his eyes on the floor and went out slowly. He slogged along and dragged himself down the stairs. If he told Lieutenant Decker exactly what had happened, then what? And if he didn't—

As Mitch started to cross the street, he tripped on the curb and almost fell. A horn blasted and a car swerved, and Mitch kept on walking.

When he got to his car, the radio was signaling. He climbed inside and stared at the dashboard and listened to the buzzing. After a while he picked up the receiver. He didn't say anything. It took him nearly half a minute to push the "On" button.

"Taylor?" the despatcher said.

"What's wrong with you? I been trying to get you for the last hour. Lieutenant Decker wants you."

Mitch sighed and spoke into the instrument. "Taylor, Car Four," he said in a dead voice.

The Lieutenant practically chirped at him. "Taylor, there's some kind of a rumpus at your place. Your kid climbed up to the roof and spotted some guy in an apartment across the courtyard cleaning a rifle. Your wife came up and saw him, too. He'd aim at your window, as if he was practising, and she recognized him as having been around to make some sort of survey. She called us and we went in, and he says he has a right to own a rifle and he never even heard of you or your wife. Know anything about him?"

Mitch knew about him all right, and grinned broadly. "A couple of things," he said. "I'll tell you when I get there."

He could take Slater any time, with a little help. Right now Mitch wondered whether to bring Joey a whole quart of ice cream or the biggest box of candy they made. That kid of his—they didn't come any better.

Then Mitch shook his head and vetoed both ideas. If Joey wanted to be a cop, he ought to learn what you get for it.

Nothing. Practically nothing.

But as Mitch drove on, he felt good—inside, where it counts.

## **Ben Hecht**

### **The Sunset Kid**

*Moony Dan played a dangerous game: he outswindled swindlers, outsharped sharpies, and trimmed the big-shot bookies. And always the stake was high—his own life. A dazzling story . . .*

I KNEW HIM WHEN HE WAS called the Sunset Kid and also Moony Dan. The first name came to him because he used to drive to the Santa Monica beach late every afternoon and watch the sun go down. He said it made him lucky. And if there was ever a man who needed a lot of luck, it was the Sunset Kid. For the Kid was a crook who devoted himself to swindling members of the underworld.

He specialized in trimming bigshot bookies and professional card gamblers. Among these he was called a "thief," which is the name illegal gamblers righteously pin on any kind of con man. Yet knowing the Kid for a thief, they let him come around and swindle them year after year. They played cards with him and took his bets on horses, and even went in on deals with him—and always got trimmed.

The Kid prospered as a thief because not only luck but psychology was on his side. The psychology was the egoism of the

big-shot crooks whom he swindled, plus the ennui in which they lived, plus their childlike interest in everything crooked.

They were wise guys who knew all the angles and who boasted that no thief could hang anything on them. The fact that the Kid constantly disproved this theory made them only eager for "a return match." And it was understood between the Kid and his victims that they would have to catch him only once. There was a lot of fascination in it for the suckers, watching a man fool them with his life at stake on a slip-up.

The name Moony Dan came to the Kid as a result of his unusual fondness for women. This is an uncommon trait among crooks, whose relation to women is likely to be crude and sketchy. Women are a minor trouble and a lesser delight in their lives.

It was otherwise with the Sunset Kid, alias Moony Dan. His love affairs had been always as important to him as his crimes,

At thirty-five he was paying alimony to two ex-wives—a fact which made his underworld contacts regard him as a bigger sucker than any of the wise guys he fleeced.

"I don't pay them money because the law tells me to," the Kid told me. "I pay it because I owe it to them, on account of they once made me happy."

This was five years ago. I asked the Kid another question at that time. He was a good-looking physical specimen. I asked him how he had stayed out of the war.

"My heart," he said. "I've got a ticker that can't take much strain. Sometimes I've got to stay in bed for a couple of days at a time."

"Sorry to hear that," I said.

"It works out," the Kid smiled. "I get to do my practice—and figuring—that way." The practice, I learned, was with a deck of cards, and the figuring was a new swindle to work on the wise guys.

I was with the Kid when he met Annie Bond, and I saw a thing happen that is seldom believable when you read about it. I saw two people fall in love at first sight like a pair of cymbals coming together. It happened so quickly and reasonlessly that I thought they were both kidding for my benefit. It wasn't only love that sat down with us at that

back table in the Mexican restaurant. Death also modestly introduced himself.

The Kid was always a neat, well-dressed fellow. He had a moody, somewhat sarcastic-looking face and a crop of curly black hair. I'd always thought him a normally attractive man. But looking at him as Annie Bond sat beside him, I saw a man of beauty. Emotion seemed to give him a new face.

I didn't know Annie well enough to know how deep or how novel was the look she turned on the Sunset Kid. In a girl of virtue and modesty, it would have been pretty convincing. But Annie was of another category. She was no tramp, for she worked hard for a living. As an entertainer in this somewhat shabby Mexican night spot, Annie sang twenty or thirty songs an evening, changed her costumes several times, and did a few dance numbers.

But she was a girl who had had bad luck with men. Beginning when she was twenty, which was eight years before she had looked at the Sunset Kid, she had always picked the wrong man or, rather, been picked by him.

She had come to Hollywood from Amarillo, Texas—red-haired and shapely, with a fair singing voice and a wagonload of temperament. Her tops had been a few bit parts in the studios, and she had slid down from there.

She sang in out-of-the-way cafés when "she got a break," she told me once. The rest of the time she clerked in stores or waited on tables or risked her life for fifty dollars a day as a stunt rider in a Western movie. And she had earned her own living every week of the eight years.

The bad luck in her love affairs came out of the fact that she attracted men who were weak and floundering around with a half talent and a half manhood. They were apt to be entertainers on the skids like herself, or idlers with an angle, or overdressed errand boys for mysterious big shots. There hadn't been too many, but there had been enough to make Annie Bond, at twenty-eight, a far cry from the innocent who had left Amarillo. The red hair was still there and the shapeliness and the unafraid lift of her neck. But the eight years had left a dust on her heart and a sneer in her eyes.

I thought of this as I saw Annie Bond staring at the Sunset Kid ten minutes after I had introduced them. She didn't return the Kid's smile, and there was none of his radiance in her look. But something somber and far-away had come into her face that made her seem like someone just born.

I saw Annie Bond and the Sunset Kid four months later. A car honked at me as I was walking to my hotel in Beverly Hills. The

Kid was behind its wheel, and Annie, her hair blowing in the wind, was beside him.

"Come on along," the Kid said. "We're taking a little ride to Santa Monica."

We reached the beach in time. The sun was resting like a red hoop on the horizon. We parked and the Kid watched it, almost as avidly as Annie Bond watched him. Her eyes were wide with love, and the eight Hollywood years were gone from her face.

The last red sliver of the sun dropped out of sight and the Kid smiled. "My lucky piece. I'm going to need it next week.... Mind if I tell him, Annie?"

Annie didn't mind.

"We're getting married," the Sunset Kid said. "On the fifteenth. Because fifteen is my lucky number. In the morning at ten thirty. And at nine o'clock that night I'm going into business. Quittin' all my tricks and settling down as a regular citizen."

"He's buying a half interest in The Congo Room," Annie's husky voice was eager. The Congo was one of Hollywood's newest night clubs; complete with name band, low-key lighting, and a run of celebrities. "Dan's going to be the manager. And I'm going to sing there."

"In a silver gown with silver slippers," said the Kid. He took her hand and kissed it. "Her

name'll be up in lights," he said.  
"Annie Bond, the Texas Nightingale."

"If I make good," said Annie.

"You've made good," the Kid said softly.

"I'm so dizzy I don't know if I'm comin' or goin'," said Annie. "Imagine something like this happening to me! I don't mean my name in lights. I mean Dan."

"To both of us," Dan smiled. "That's why I'm quittin' the tricks. They used to be the only fun there was. Now they don't mean anything."

I thought of some questions.

"Buying in on the Congo is going to require a bank roll, isn't it?"

"Ten grand, cash," he answered.

"Have you got it?" I asked.

"I'm getting it on the fifteenth," the Sunset Kid smiled.

Seven men sat in Rocky Blair's elegant living room. Three of them were bodyguards, three were Rocky's friends and assistants. The seventh was Rocky. Six were in shirt sleeves, collars undone. It was one P.M., June fifteenth, and the day was hot.

Rocky was having his breakfast on a tray. He was fully and resplendently dressed, as became a king, regardless of the hour or temperature. Rocky's empire consisted of five hundred bookies—and several unallied and

legal enterprises which he ran as a sort of hobby. Chief among these was the Boulevard Florist Shop in the center of Hollywood. It was in the rear of the rambling, sweet-scented establishment that Rocky had his "home office."

Out of this aromatic chamber Rocky operated his five hundred bookies. For guiding them financially, delivering them out of bondage when the police grew fractious, and smoothing their ways with the juices of bribery and corruption in high and low places, Rocky pulled down an average of a hundred thousand dollars each week.

There was no syndicate involved. There was only Rocky, sitting, as he sat this hot day, as the one and only king of the territory between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

Rocky was a finicky man with a round, tight face that nobody had ever seen unshaved. He had, despite the elegance of his attire, the look of a well-barbered pugilist sitting in his corner between rounds, with motionless, determined eyes, and lips pinched together—and waiting. The posture and expression came naturally to him, for he had sat in a ring corner as a pugilist during five of his youthful years.

Rocky sat in silence with his six guests as he drank his coffee. The three bodyguards were mugs with nothing to say. The three

assistants, more capable of conversation, specialized in being as tight-mouthed as their boss.

A musical gong sounded three times. It was the front doorbell. Rocky continued sipping his coffee and nobody moved. The gong sounded again, and Rocky looked at Gil, the smallest of the bodyguards, but who wore a gun and holster near his left armpit, visible only when his coat was off, as now.

Gil stood up and moved to the front door. Two attempts to wipe out Rocky Blair had been made that month.

The six listened to the outer door open. There were no shots and no bomb came rolling into the room, from which they knew that this was a social caller.

Gil re-entered the silent room.

"It's that Moony Dan," he said.

"What's the thief want?"

"To see you, Rocky," said Gil.

"Throw him out," said the fat-faced Tubby Fields, who was considered Rocky's "brains." "Don't waste any time."

"Shut up," said Rocky. Everybody waited a full minute, and then Rocky concluded his speech, "Show the gentleman in."

Gil went into the hallway again and undid the two steel chains on the door. He returned leading the Sunset Kid.

Nobody spoke. Rocky peered out of the living-room window into the street beyond the wide lawn.

"You got no car," said Rocky.

"I came in a taxi," the Kid said.

"On purpose, eh?" Rocky scowled. "What the hell for?"

"I felt lucky," the Sunset Kid answered.

All seven men in the room put on the same expression. It was an expression of indifference. And all seven felt the same lift of excitement. The Kid had announced openly that he had come to steal money again from Rocky Blair.

"Throw him out," said Tubby.

Nobody moved and the Kid sat down. Rocky finished his coffee. Anger fumed in his eyes. This monkey had taken him three times—once in a poker game in this same room. With seven guys watching every move of the thief's fingers, and putting a fresh deck of cards into play every fifteen minutes, this trimmer had taken him for twenty-eight hundred dollars. And all in the last pot, which was the way he always worked. You got four kings and he came up with his signature—four aces—and blew.

"I ain't playin' cards," said Rocky.

"Glad to hear it," said the Kid. "Takes too long to make a killing at cards. Sometimes you have to sit around for hours."

"I make the suggestion a thoid time," said Tubby Fields. "Throw this fella out."

Rocky scowled at his "brains." Usually he followed Tubby's advice. Tubby, he always said, had a "fourth sense." He knew things in advance. But Rocky didn't want to throw the Kid out. It would be a confession of weakness, and besides, how could a thief trim him in his own house with seven guys watching his every move?

"I'm doin' this," Rocky answered Tubby. "So shut up." Turning to his visitor, he added, "What kind-of play do you want?"

"I feel lucky on horses today," said the Kid.

All seven in the room, including even Tubby Fields, were glad nobody had thrown the visitor out—because this was going to be something good. The Kid was going to try to pull a "past-post" betting gag on the boss, right under their noses. That was different from pulling it on the lugs behind the bookie counters. All seven remembered, in a minimum of words, the Kid's work as a betting thief. He had made a lot of cleanups placing bets after a race was over, and betting on a horse that had already won. One of the simpler ways he had used was calling up three minutes before a race had started and putting down bets on the race that was going to follow. There was a girl taking the bets. And the Kid would keep on talking to the girl over the phone, telling her some

story he had found out about her sister, and offering to help get the sister out of some trouble she was in. And then, all of a sudden, he would say, "Put five hundred on Sun Up to win in the second." The girl taking the bets would forget to look at the clock because she was excited over the Kid saving her sister, and she would mark down: "Sun Up—\$500—Second Race." And the second race would be already run and over.

The Kid would come around at five to collect his winnings, and the girl would be fired.

There were other tricks the Kid had worked. Rocky remembered them all, including the "invisible-ink" trick. The Kid had handed in a betting slip with the names of three horses on it to win the third, fourth, and fifth races. On the slip was also written the name of a horse that had already won the first race. But it was written in invisible ink. The bookie couldn't see it when he filed the betting slip. By five o'clock, when the Kid came around to collect, the invisible ink had "come up" and become visible. And the bookie had to pay off on a horse that had been bet on after he had won the race.

Tubby had figured that one out, but there was no proving it. And you couldn't knock a guy off without catching him guilty. This was the unwritten law in Rocky's

kingdom just as it was the written law outside it.

Not only Rocky, but all the others here in Rocky's home knew every past-post betting gag that had ever been pulled. And all seven went to work at once. That is, they alerted themselves.

"Sit over here," said Tubby Fields. He moved the Sunset Kid away from the window overlooking the wide lawn and arranged his chair so that the visitor's back was to it. There would be no signaling from outside.

Nate, the oldest and wisest bookie among Rocky's retainers, opened the window and looked out. Rocky's house stood in a sparsely built and w o u l d - b e fashionable neighborhood. There was no house on its immediate left or right. The street was wide and there were no houses of any sort on the opposite side.

Rocky looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was 1:10.

"You got some nag picked?" Rocky asked.

He winked at Tubby, and Tubby winked back. The others also winked at one another.

The Kid looked at the seven men all now openly studying his hands, feet, and face.

"I like Count Monty in the first," he said, "but I haven't made up my mind yet."

"You want a little more time, eh?" Rocky sneered. Count Monty was running at 1:30.

"That's right," said the Kid. "Do you mind if I use your bathroom, Mr. Blair?"

"Go right ahead," said Rocky. "There's one in the hallway."

"Yes, I know," the Kid said. He stood up and started out of the room. At a nod from Rocky, two of his guests also stood up and followed the Kid as far as the bathroom door. They remained outside.

"He ain't gonna try," said Gil, a little regretfully. "You scared him off, Rocky."

"He'll try," said Tubby Fields.

"Naw," Rocky grinned coldly, "He was feelin' big when he came in here. He ain't feelin' so big now."

"Too bad," one of the guards said, "We could 'a' caught him."

"He's gonna try," Tubby repeated.

"Okay," said Rocky. "Then we'll catch him. I been wantin' to catch that thief a long time."

Inside the bathroom, the Sunset Kid turned the key in the lock and smiled to himself. He knew the talk that was being made in the room he had left. He knew that Tubby Fields was on the telephone getting the right time and setting his watch by it, and the clock on the mantelpiece. One thirty would be one thirty in Rocky's living room, the same as it was in the rest of California, including the Santa Anita Race Track.

But the Kid was smiling at something more important going on in the room he had left—it's psychology. He knew that at 1:33, one minute after the first race at Santa Anita had been run, Rocky would take his bet—on the horse that had won.

The Kid switched on the electric light over the medicine cabinet, turned on both faucets to cover the sound, and then unscrewed the electric bulb. He sighed as he worked. He was glad this was his last trick—just this one for Annie—nothing else. He removed the tin-foil lining from a package of cigarettes and shaped it into a penny-sized disk. Placing the tin foil in the socket, he screwed the bulb tightly into place.

There was a faint pop, and the Kid knew a fuse in some basement box had been blown. He unscrewed the bulb again and removed the tin foil. He had knocked out the bathroom current, and the odds were twenty to one that the adjoining living room was on the same fuse.

If it was, he was "in business." If it wasn't—the Kid shrugged mentally—he would have to dream up another gag. He made a deep wish. "Annie, make it work," he muttered. Then he rinsed his hands quickly, turned off the water, and opened the door.

"You're sittin' here," said Tub-

by Fields as the Kid preceded the bodyguards into the living room. "The same chair."

The Kid sat down.

Rocky looked at the clock. It was 1:17.

"You made up your mind yet?" he asked.

"I think I'll skip the first race."

Rocky's face stiffened and darkened.

"We ain't taking bets after starting time," Tubby Fields said quietly. "Don't try pullin' any."

"Shut up," Rocky said. "I'm concentratin'." His eyes, tense and angry, were on the Kid's face.

"It's one twenty-five," said Tubby after a long silence.

"Okay," said Rocky, "turn on the radio. We'll catch the first race."

Biggy, one of the guards, stepped to the radio cabinet. Nobody watched him. All eyes remained on the thief.

"No bets after the race starts," said Rocky. "This is your last chance. You want to make a play?"

"I don't feel it," said the Kid.

"Hell!" Biggy was muttering. "This thing ain't workin'."

Hearing Biggy's words, the Sunset Kid relaxed. He knew he was "in business." The rest was psychology.

"What ain't workin'?" Rocky asked irritably.

"The radio," said Biggy. "He's knocked it out."

"Who's knocked it out?" Rocky kept his eyes on the visitor.

"The Kid," said Biggy.

"He ain't touched it," said Rocky firmly. "Get the set out of my bedroom. Hurry up."

Tubby Fields stood up and cried out harshly. "He's done it, I tell ya! The gag is on! Throw him out!"

"He's done nothin'," said Rocky. "I been watchin' him. Shut up now."

Biggy returned with a smaller radio set and plugged it into a light socket. Rocky looked at the mantelpiece clock. It was 1:30.

"This one don't work either," Biggy growled. "He's busted this one likewise."

The Kid's eyes were on Tubby Fields. He waited for the "brains" to call the shot—a blown fuse. But the "brains" was too busy watching to think. Besides, the Kid was gambling that the theory of fuse boxes was unknown to them.

"Is the wire cut?" one of Rocky's aides asked.

"The wire's okay," said Biggy. "There's somethin' the matter inside. It don't even go on."

Dimly, Rocky was aware that this was a feint of some kind, and he kept his eyes on every flick of the thief's eyes.

"That's too bad," said the Sunset Kid. "I would have liked to hear that race run. I had a hunch on Count Monty. But I'm

glad I didn't bet. Because I got a bigger hunch right now, a real feeling. Blue Skies. Care to take a bet on Blue Skies, Mr. Blair?"

Rocky looked at the clock. It was 1:33. The first race had ended a minute ago—if they'd got away quick.

"I'll put three thousand on Blue Skies to win," said the Sunset Kid. "It's no different playing my hunch now than ten minutes ago. You don't know and I don't know what's happened."

As he talked, the Kid removed six five-hundred-dollar bills and put them on the breakfast tray at Rocky's elbow.

"You taking my bet?" he asked. Rocky's hand reached for the money. "I'm taking that bet," he said.

The room was silent. There had been no signal. The thief had sat in the middle of the room, his back to the street fifty feet beyond. Tubby waddled to the phone and called a number. The room waited for his announcement.

"Tubby Fields," said Tubby huskily into the mouthpiece. "Gimme the results in the first at Santa Anita."

He listened and hung up slowly. "Blue Skies by a nose," he announced. "Paid seven to two."

"You dirty thief," Rocky said. "You've stole ten grand off me."

"I didn't steal it," said the Sunset Kid softly. "I won it."

"You stole it," Rocky repeated. His hand moved slowly under his coat. He was forgetting the unwritten law.

"If you want to welsh on a bet you took," said the Kid, "go ahead. You don't have to shoot me. You just don't pay off."

Rocky's hand stopped moving. A gambler couldn't do anything against that kind of talk. It was an easy psychology play from here in, and the Kid kept all smugness out of his voice.

"You made the bet after looking at the clock," he said. "But if you feel you've been taken, in your own house, with all your smart pals watching me, you don't have to pay. That's up to you, Mr. Blair."

"I'm payin'," said Rocky.

He took ten thousand-dollar bills out of his wallet.

"I'll give you five more," he said quietly, "if you tell me how you done it."

The Kid smiled at the trap. "I got a feeling all of a sudden," he answered naively. "It came a little late, but it was a genuine feeling."

He took the bills from Rocky's hand and picked up his own three thousand. The others watched and were silent.

"You're a lousy thief," said Rocky, without emotion. "You never won an honest nickel in your life. I'm payin' off, because I took the bet with my eyes open.

But I'm gonna get the money back. I'm gonna find out what kind of a gag you pulled. And when I find out, I'm comin' after you. And you won't need no money after that."

The Sunset Kid waited patiently for Rocky to finish his long, slow speech.

"I'm sorry you've got that attitude, Mr. Blair," he said. "But thanks for payin' off."

He nodded, added, "So long," and walked slowly out of the room.

Outside in the bright afternoon, the Sunset Kid walked toward a boulevard intersection two blocks distant. As he turned the corner he glanced back to see if anyone had followed him. The blazing street was empty of all life.

Four automobiles were lined up, one behind the other, at the boulevard curb. It was an odd collection of cars. The oddity lay in their coloring. One was black, one bright green, one red, and the fourth was yellow.

The Sunset Kid thought of the fifth and missing car, the light blue one. He resavored for a moment the thrill of catching a glimpse of it in the mirror over Rocky's mantelpiece, watching the bit of blue flash by. He had even noted in that brief swing across the mirror that Annie's hair was flying and her face grinning. She had flashed by at a good seventy.

The mystification of the seven

men and the almost foolish simplicity of the gag kept the Kid grinning as he got into the red car. There had been five horses running in the first race. Each of the different colors of the five cars represented one of the running horses. Annie had sat getting the race over the car radio. As soon as the winner was called, Annie had jumped into the right car—blue for Blue Skies.

The Kid drove the red job to the car-rental garage out of which he had taken it three days ago. He returned an hour later to the boulevard curb and the three other rented cars. One by one, he restored them to their widely separated garage headquarters.

It was nearly seven when the Kid had returned the last of the four rentals. He was weary and hot with driving. A quick look at the sky told him he was on schedule. He would be able to get to the beach in Santa Monica in time to watch the sun go down, with Annie. She would be waiting, parked at their usual front-row seat for the sunset; in the blue car.

There was no blue car parked when the Sunset Kid rolled up to the beach end of the street. He shut off the motor and sat staring at the sun going down.

Annie would drive up any minute. Annie had gone to buy something—a hot dog or sunburn lotion. The sun seemed to take

a long time going down. The Kid tried to breathe casually. Annie would show. What were a few minutes of waiting? There was a whole life of Annie ahead now. The Kid turned on the car radio. Time passed faster when music was playing. It was seven thirty and the Kid hit a news broadcast and let it run.

Suddenly he took his eyes from the setting sun. He closed them and looked at nothing. The newscaster's voice filled the car:

"Los Angeles counted its one hundred and fortieth victim of reckless driving this afternoon. A car speeding along at seventy miles an hour down a Brentwood residential street crashed into a parked delivery truck. The driver of the car was killed instantly. Her name was Annie Bond, a young and beautiful cafe singer known as the Texas Nightingale."

When the Sunset Kid opened his eyes, the Pacific was dark. His hands were shaking and he couldn't move his legs to start the car. He laid his head on the wheel and cried.

Three days later, the Sunset Kid walked into Rocky Blair's Boulevard Flower Shop. A heavy-set man with a cauliflower ear was behind the main counter. He stared at the Kid and said nothing.

Biggy looked up from a picture magazine he was reading. He also said nothing, but walked to a door

at the rear of the flower shop. He pressed a button three times. The heavy steel door opened.

"That fella's here," said Biggy. "That Moony Dan."

Rocky Blair came out, followed by Tubby Fields. Rocky went behind the flower counter. Biggy and Tubby took a place on each side of the Kid.

"I read about your girl," said Rocky. "She was killed in an accident after drivin' a blue car past my house. Around one-thirty."

The Kid nodded.

"I been lookin' for you," said Rocky. He stared at the white face and the bloodshot eyes in front of him and asked harshly, "What do you want?"

"I want to buy some flowers," the Kid said.

"We're wastin' time," said Tubby. "Take him into the office, Biggy."

"Shut up," Rocky scowled. "I'm waitin' on a customer .... What kind o' flowers do you want, Kid?"

"Roses," said the Sunset Kid. "I want fifteen dollars' worth of roses sent every week to Miss Annie Bond. She's buried in Forest Lawn. I want the roses put on her grave every week for the next fifteen years. That'll be about ten grand. And seven hundred extra. I'm paying in advance."

The Kid put ten one-thousand dollar bills on the counter and added another seven hundred.

"That'll cover it," he said. "And if you sell the business or anything happens, I'd like you to fix it so the delivery keeps on."

Rocky Blair looked at the shaking hands and the bleared eyes in front of the counter.

"Mr. Fields will enter your order," said Rocky stiffly. "The flowers will be delivered as specified." He paused, scowled and added, "Take care of the man, Tubby, and give him a receipt." And Rocky walked back into his steel-doored office.

When I go to the Santa Monica beach, I stop in at an oyster bar that faces the ocean. It's a small and rather sloppy place, and the sea food is none too good. But I go there for a meal now and then because Dan Flato waits on me.

He used to be called the Sunset Kid.

His hands are still shaking and his eyes have kept the bleary look that came to them one time when he watched the sun go down. But the Kid doesn't watch the sun any more. He has a new hobby. When he waits on me his eyes look across the counter toward the street end where Annie Bond was going to meet him—that time.

# Michael Innes

## The End of the End

*How can we best describe this Michael Innes short novel about Sir John Appleby, now Commissioner of London's Metropolitan Police? Well, surely it can be called a literate, civilized British detective story—literate and civilized in the manner of its telling, dialogue, sidelights, and characterizations; British in its medieval castle with keep (tower), inner bailey (courtyard), long gallery (complete with ghost), ancient well (complete with legend); and detective story in its traditional elements—an "odd" group stranded in a snowstorm, a friendly game of archery, footprints (or the lack of them) in the fresh snow, clues and deductions and—but we've told you enough. Let your mind go back to the "good old days"—relax—sip a drink or nibble a biscuit—and have a grand old time reading of the mysterious events at Gore Castle, and how Sir John Appleby and Lady Judith Appleby, marooned and menaced, solve the beautiful jigsawed and dove-tailed problem of the ascham...*

### Detective: SIR JOHN APPLEBY

I WON'T SWEAR," APPLEYB said, "that we haven't been mildly rash. But we'll get through." He shifted gears cautiously. "With luck, we'll get through . . . Damn!"

The exclamation was fair enough. The car had been doing splendidly. At times, indeed, it seemed to float on the snow rather than cut through it, and when this happened it showed itself disconcertingly susceptible to the polar attractions—polar in more

than one sense—of the bank rising steeply on its left and the almost obliterated ditch on its right.

And now Appleby, steering an uncertain course round a bend, had been obliged to pull up—and to pull up more abruptly than was altogether safe. There was a stationary car straight in front, blocking the narrow country road.

"Bother!" Lady Appleby said. "It's stuck. We'll have to help dig it out."

Appleby peered through the

windshield. Snow was still lightly falling through the gathering dusk.

"It won't be a question of helping," he said. "If you ask me, it's abandoned. I'll investigate."

He climbed out of the car and found himself at once up to his knees in snow.

"We've been pretty crazy," he said, and plunged toward the other car.

Judith Appleby waited for a minute. Then, growing impatient, she climbed out too. She found her husband gazing in some perplexity at the stranded vehicle. It was an ancient but powerful-looking sedan.

"Abandoned, all right," Appleby said, and tried one of the doors. "Locked, too. Not very helpful, that."

"What do you mean, not very helpful?"

"If we could get in, we could release the brake and perhaps be able to shove it aside. It's not all that snowed in is it?"

"Definitely not." Judith peered at the wheels. "Engine failure, probably. But it stymies us."

"Exactly. The driver got away while the going was good. Rather a faint-hearted bolt, if you ask me, and some time ago. There are footprints going on down the road. They have a good deal of fresh snow in them."

"I suppose that must be called a professional observation. Let's get back into our own car. I'm

cold. But why didn't the silly ass stay put? It's by far the safest thing to do. And one can be perfectly snug in a stranded car."

She had kicked some of the snow from her feet and climbed back into her seat. She closed the door beside her.

"It's beautifully warm in here. Stupid of him to stagger off into the night that way."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Appleby got in beside his wife. Their car was rather far from being a conveyance of the modest sort; the abandoned car was markedly humbler and less commodious. Appleby refrained from pointing this out.

"I do find it a shade puzzling," he said. "But our own course is fairly simple. We'll go in reverse as far as that last crossroad. It can't be more than a mile . . . Good Lord, what's that?"

"I rather think—" Turning in her seat, Judith looked through the rear window. "Yes. It's something sublimely simple, John dear. An avalanche."

Appleby looked too. "Avalanche" was perhaps too grand a word for what had happened. But there could be no doubt about the fact. The bank behind them was extremely steep; nevertheless, a surprising depth of snow had contrived to gather on it, and this had now precipitated itself upon the road.

Appleby had to waste little time

estimating the dimensions of the resulting problem. Their car was trapped.

"Never mind, darling." Judith, when cross, usually adopted a philosophical tone. "There's some chocolate in the glove compartment. And we can keep the engine running and the heater on. It's a good thing you filled up."

"A good thing I filled up? You said—".

Appleby broke off, having glanced at the gasoline gauge. It was not one of those occasions on which expostulation serves any useful purpose.

"There's under a gallon," he said. "And we haven't got an emergency can. Civilization is always lulling one into a false sense of security."

"But, surely, that's all right? Just ticking over, the gas will last, won't it, for hours and hours?"

"Undoubtedly. Into the small hours, in fact."

"The small hours?"

"Two in the morning. Perhaps three."

"I see." Judith, who had been contentedly breaking up a bar of chocolate, seemed to lose heart a little. "John, when the heater stops, how long will the car take to—to get cold?"

"Oh, a quite surprisingly long time. Fifteen minutes. Perhaps even twenty." Appleby picked up a piece of chocolate. "I think," he said rather grimly, "you'd bet-

ter get out the map. And I'll turn on this inside light. It's getting dark."

"We are a surprisingly long way from the main road," Judith said presently. "I'd no idea it was so far."

"Um," Appleby said.

"There's that last signpost—at least, I think it is."

"It's a reasonable conjecture."

"I'd forgotten it was so deserted a countryside. There doesn't seem to be a hamlet, or even a house, for miles. But wait a minute." Judith's finger moved across the map. "Here's something. 'Gore Castle.' Only it's in a funny sort of print."

"That means it's a ruin. They use a Gothic type for places of archeological or antiquarian interest."

"But I don't think Gore Castle is a ruin—or not all of it. I'm sure I've heard about it."

Judith seemed for the moment to have forgotten their depressing situation.

"Get out the *Historic Houses*."

Appleby did as he was told. The work was very much Judith's *vade mecum*, and she flicked through its pages expertly.

"Here we are," she said. "Yes, I was quite right. Listen: 'Three miles south of Gore. Residence of J. L. Darien-Gore, Esq. Dates partly from Thirteenth Century. Pictures, tapestries, furniture, stained glass, long gallery—' "

"I never heard of a medieval castle having a long gallery," Appleby remarked.

"It must be the kind of castle that turns into a Jacobean mansion at the back. But let me go on. —long gallery, formal gardens, famous well—"

"Famous what?"

"Well. A wishing well, perhaps, or something like that: 'April 1 to October 15—Thursdays only, two to six: Admission 2/6. Tea and biscuits at Castle. Catering facilities at Gore Arms, Gore.' I knew I was right."

"About the biscuits?"

"About its being inhabited. This Darien-Gore person—and I'm sure I've heard the name—"

"It does seem to recall something."

"Well, he certainly lives there. We only have to find the place and introduce ourselves."

"I'd say we only have to find the place. No need to put on the social act. The chap can't very well thrust us back into the night. Not that the question is other than academic. We can't possibly set out to find Gore Castle. It's almost dark already, and we'd be off the road and lost in no time. That mightn't be a joke. The drifts must be formidable by now."

"But, John, I can see the castle. It's positively beckoning to us."

"See it? You're imagining things. Visibility is presently going to be zero."

"Over there to the right. Let your eye travel past the back of the stranded car. You see?"

"Yes—I see. But—"

J. L. Darien-Gore, Esq., has turned on a light—perhaps high in the keep, or something. It's rather romantic."

"If it's high in the tower, it may be anything up to five miles away."

"We can follow the light for five miles."

"My dear Judith, have some sense! Darien-Gore—if it is he—may turn it off again at any moment. We're able to see it at all only because it has stopped snowing—"

"Which is encouraging in itself."

Appleby had produced a small pair of binoculars, and was focusing them on the light.

"I think it possibly is the Castle," he said, and slipped the binoculars back into his coat pocket. "But we might go only a hundred yards and then lose it because of some configuration in the terrain."

"Bother the terrain. And I'd say we can each carry a suitcase."

"Dash it all!" Very incautiously Appleby allowed himself to be diverted by this maneuver: "We can't turn up on the fellow's doorstep as if he ran a blessed hotel."

"I think it would be only considerate. Otherwise, Mr. Darien-

Gore would have to send grooms and people to rescue our possessions."

"Sometimes I think you are beginning to suffer from delusions of grandeur."

But Appleby was fishing two suitcases from the rear of the car. He'd taken another careful look at that light, and decided it couldn't be very far away. The venture was worth the risk.

"At least we've got a torch," he said. "So come on."

They plunged into the snow. But Appleby paused again by the abandoned car. If the fellow had just contrived to steer into the side of the road, they themselves would probably have managed to get past the obstruction, and so be on their way by now.

Appleby felt the radiator. He looked again at the surface of the road immediately in front. The snow was deep enough. But it wasn't that deep. He shook his head, and trudged on.

"Not at all," Mr. Darien-Gore said. "The gain is all mine—and my guests'. Most delighted to have you here."

Jasper Darien-Gore was in early middle-age. Spare and upright, he would have suggested chiefly an athlete who has carefully kept in excellent physical condition—if he hadn't more obviously and immediately impressed himself as the product of centuries of breeding.

His appearance was as thoroughly Anglo-Norman as was that of his Castle. And he had the air of courteous informality and perfect diffidence that masks the arrogance of his kind.

"And I do hope," Darien-Gore added, "that this will prove a reasonably comfortable room."

Appleby looked around him in appreciation. It was, at least, a reasonably splendid room. If it was comfortable as well—which seemed very likely—the comfort hadn't been secured at the expense of disturbing the general medieval effect.

The walls were hung with tapestries in which sundry allegorical events dimly transacted themselves; logs crackled in a fireplace in which it would have been possible to park a small car; there was an enormous fourposter bed. It was no doubt one of the apartments that tourists could view (on Thursdays only) for half a crown.

Appleby wasn't without an awkward feeling that he ought to produce a couple of half crowns now.

"Ah!" Darien-Gore said. "Here is my brother, Robert. He has heard of the accession to our company, and has come to add his welcome to mine."

It seemed to Appleby that these last words had been uttered less by way of politeness than of instruction. Robert Darien-Gore

was not looking very adequately welcoming! He was much younger than Jasper; equally handsome, equally strong and athletic in suggestion, and decidedly colder and more reserved. Heredity, perhaps, had dealt less kindly with him. His, in fact, was a curiously haunted face—and not the less so from its air of now quickly assuming an appropriate social mask:

"Robert," Jasper said, "let me introduce you to—" He broke off. "By the way, I think it is *Lady* Appleby? But of course! I was sure I recognized your husband. One never knows whether it is quite civil to tell people one has spotted them from photographs in the public prints. Robert—Sir John and Lady Appleby. Sir John is Commissioner of Metropolitan Police."

"How do you do! I'm so glad you found your way to Gore Castle. It might have been awkward for you, otherwise."

Robert was producing adequate interest. It couldn't have been put higher than that.

"We couldn't possibly have been luckier," Judith said. "We had a guide book, you know, and it said 'Tea and biscuits at Castle.' I had a wonderful feeling that we were saved."

"And so you are, Lady Appleby." Jasper Darien-Gore, who appeared to be more amused than his brother, nodded cordially.

"The kettle, I assure you, is just on the boil."

Judith, Appleby thought, was made to take this sort of situation in her stride. One couldn't even say that she was putting on a social act. She was just being her natural self. Judith, in fact, ought to have married not a policeman but an ambassador.

"I hope that being held up for a night isn't desperately inconvenient," Robert said. "And I really came in to ask at once whether we could do anything about a message. The snow has brought our telephone line down, unfortunately—and it's the same, it seems, at the home farm. But I think we might manage to get one of the men through to the village."

"Thank you," Appleby said. "But there's no need for anything of the sort. Nobody's going to miss us tonight, and I'm sure we can get ourselves dug out in the morning."

"Then, for the moment, I'll leave you." Robert turned to his brother. "They're amusing themselves in the gallery again. I'll just go and see they do nothing lethal."

With the ghost of a smile Robert left the room.

"Thank you!" Judith was saying—not to her host, but to her host's butler, whose name turned out to be Frape. The fact that Frape himself had brought up

their suitcases was a simple index of the hold that Judith was getting on the place.

"There, please." Judith had pointed to an enormous expanse of oak—it might have been a refectory table of an antiquity not commonly come by—on which the suitcases could modestly repose.

She turned to Darien-Gore. "It's so good of you," she said. "Sheer pests hammer at your door, frost-bitten and *famished*"—Judith quite shamelessly emphasized this word—"and you don't bat an eyelid."

"I had no impulse to bat." Darien-Gore was amused. "And, of course, one mustn't—not on one's own doorstep. But, come to think of it, I almost did—bat, I mean—shortly before you came. You see, somebody else has shown up—a fellow who had to abandon his car—"

"The car that prevented ours from getting through, I expect," Appleby said.

"That may well be. And a perfectly decent fellow, I imagine. Yet I had an obscure impulse to get rid of him—or at least to murmur that Frape would fix him up comfortably in—"

"I should be very willing to, sir?" Frape, who had been giving a little ritual attention to the appointments of the room, interrupted his employer. "And it's not, I think, too late. Nothing

very definite has been proposed."

"Thank you, Frape, but I think not." Darien-Gore had spoken a shade sharply; and he now waited until the butler had withdrawn. "Frape finds the fellow not quite qualified to sit on the dais, as one might say. No doubt he's right. But of course he'll dine with us. Under the circumstances, anything else would not be the hospitable thing. Perhaps I was put off a bit when he told me his name was Jolly. Difficult name to live up to—particularly, of course, when your car has been stranded in the snow."

"I wasn't terribly clear that his car *was* stranded," Appleby said. "He didn't say anything to suggest it had broken down?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't recall that he did. Oh, by the way." Darien-Gore, who had appeared to be about to take his leave, now changed his mind, and walked over to a heavily curtained window. "I'm terribly sorry that, in the morning, you won't find much of a view. This room simply looks out on the inner bailey—an enclosed courtyard, that's to say. Perhaps you can see it now. The sky's cleared a little, and there's a moon."

He drew back the curtain. "Step into the embrasure, and we'll draw these curtains again. No need to turn out the lights."

Appleby and Judith did as they were told. The effect was suddenly

to enclose them in a small darkened room, one side of which was almost entirely glass. And as a moon had certainly appeared, they were looking out on a nocturnal scene very adequately illuminated for purposes of pictur-esque effect.

Directly in front of them the keep or tower of the Castle was silhouetted as a dark mass—partly against the sky and partly against the surrounding snows. It was a bleakly rectangular structure at present encased in a crisscross of metal and wooden scaffolding. This added to its grim appearance. It was like a prison that had been thrust inside a cage.

"You seem to have quite a job of work on hand, over there," Appleby said.

"Perfectly true. The weather has halted it for a time, but during the autumn we had masons all over the Castle. The Office of Work pays for most of it, I'm thankful to say."

Darien-Gore laughed whimsically. "Odd, isn't it? My ancestors built the Castle to defy the Crown, more or less. And now the Crown comes along, tells me I'm an Ancient Monument, and spends pots of money proping up my ruins."

"Is that the famous well?" Judith asked. She pointed downward to the courtyard.

The inner bailey was a virgin rectangle of untrodden

snow—part in shadow and part glittering in the moonlight. In the center of it a low circular wall, about the size of a large cartwheel, surrounded a patch of impenetrable darkness.

"Yes, that's the well. I see you must really have been reading that guide book, Lady Appleby. It's certainly what everybody wants to see. We put a grid over it when the Castle's being shown—otherwise, we might have a nasty bill for damages one day."

"But why is it famous?" Judith asked. "Is there some legend connected with it?"

"Nothing of that kind. What's out of the way about it is matter of sober fact. It oughtn't really to be called a well. Think of it as a shaft—an uncommonly deep one—going down to a subterranean river, and you get the idea of it. The guide recites *Kubla Khan* to them, you know. To the tourists, I mean."

"How very strange!" Judith said. "'Where Alph, the sacred river, ran'?"

"Exactly. And *through caverns measureless to man*. There's some vast underground system there in the limestone. Ever been to those caves outside Rheims, where you walk for miles between bottles of champagne? It's said to be like that here—only on a vastly larger scale. And, of course, no champagne."

"Can it be explored?" Judith

asked. "By the kind of people who go potholing—that sort of thing?"

"Not possible, it seems. Cast anything down my well, and it's gone forever. And that doesn't apply merely to orange peel and three-penny bits. If you wanted to get rid of an elephant, and no questions asked or askable, the well would be just the place. It's had its grim enough uses in the past, as you can guess."

Rather abruptly, yet with a touch of achieved showmanship, Darien-Gore opened the curtains again.

"We dine at eight," he said. "Before that, people often gather for an hour or so in the gallery. At this time of year it serves its original purpose very well. All sorts of games are possible, and we can manage a little archery. I don't know whether either of you happens to be interested in that sort of thing."

"I've tried archery from time to time," Judith said. "And I'd like to improve."

"Then you must have a go at it under Robert's instruction. He's quite keen, I'm glad to say."

Darien-Gore paused, as if uncertain whether to proceed. "As my small house party consists of intimates, perhaps you will forgive me if I say something more about my brother. He is moody at times. In fact, his nervous health has not been good over the past year,

and allowances must sometimes be made for him. I think you will like his wife, Prunella. She's a courageous woman."

"And who else is staying at the Castle?" Judith asked. She had received with the appropriate mild concern the confidence just imparted to her.

"Well, there's the unexpected Mr. Jolly, whom you've heard about. By the way, we've put him in the room next to yours. My glimpse of him doesn't suggest that he will be quite as entertaining as his name sounds. Then there's my very old friend Ned Strickland and his wife Dorcas—"

"How nice!" Judith said. "We know them quite well."

"That's capital—and shows, my dear Lady Appleby, how well house parties arrange themselves at Gore Castle. The only other guest is a chap named Charles Trevor, who does something or other in the City. We were at school together, and have been trying to revive an old acquaintance. And now I'll leave you. The bells do ring, by the way—and just at present there even appear to be young women who answer them. But I don't know what my father would have thought of running Gore Castle on a gaggle of housemaids."

"A gaggle of housemaids." Appleby was opening his suitcase with an expression of some gloom.

"I suppose one might call that rather a territorial joke. Would you say I'd better put on this damned dinner jacket?"

"Yes, of course. And it's lucky I brought a decent frock."

"Our fellow waif-and-stray, Mr. Jolly, won't have a dinner jacket."

"You'll find that one or another of the Darien-Gores will keep him company by not dressing. But the other men will."

"Oh, very well." Appleby had little doubt that it would turn out just as Judith said.

"We're lucky to have hit upon such civilized people. And I look forward to seeing the Stricklands."

"My dear Judith, General Strickland is an amiable bore."

"Yes, but he's a very old friend of the family. Get him in a corner and he'll tell you all about the Darien-Gores. I'm curious about them."

"I'm sure you are. But I doubt whether there's a great deal to learn. I've a notion that Jasper was once a distinguished athlete—"

"Yes, that rings a bell. Something aquatic—high diving or water polo or—"

"No doubt. And he's simply lived on his income ever since. As for the melancholic Robert, perhaps the less one learns about him the better."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Having found the dress she wanted, Judith was shaking it out

on its hanger. "You don't think he's mad, do you?"

"I'd hardly suppose so. But when a chap like Jasper Darien-Gore starts apologizing in advance for his brother, one has to suppose there's something rather far wrong. And I've an impression that Robert, and presumably his wife Prunella, aren't simply here on a week-end visit. In some obscure way Robert has taken refuge here. And you and I, my dear, butting in the way we have butted in, have very precisely the social duty to discover nothing about it."

"Perhaps we have. Only it's not in your nature, John, to refrain from looking into things—just as you're doing now."

That was fair enough. Turning out his pockets as he changed, Appleby had come upon the binoculars he had first used in their search for Gore Castle. He had drawn back a curtain and was using them now to take a closer look at the inner bailey.

The moon was rising, and the sky had blown clear. Straight opposite, the keep was no longer a mere dark mass within its scaffolding. One could make out something of the detail of its surface, pierced by narrow unglazed windows.

Below, the carpet of snow, untrodden even by the tracks of cat or bird, surrounded the sinister well.

"Come along," Judith said.  
"We mustn't skulk."

Appleby closed the curtain and put down the binoculars. They left the room together. A few paces down the corridor there was a half-open door on their right. And it was true that Appleby could seldom "refrain from looking into things." He did so now.

A middle-aged man, sharp-featured and indefinably furtive, seemed to have turned back into the room when he was just about to leave it. He was now transferring from a small suitcase to his jacket pocket what looked like a rather bulky pocketbook.

"Well, well!" Appleby had walked on for some paces before he murmured this. "Not only do we know the Stricklands, we know Mr. Jolly as well."

"Nonsense! I took a glance at the man. I'm certain I've never seen him before."

"All right. But I know Mr. Jolly quite well. Possibly he doesn't know me."

"I don't see how—"

"I know him by sight, I ought to say. I've had the advantage of studying his photograph."

"You mean he's a criminal?"

"He's thought to be. Perhaps it wouldn't be fair to put it stronger than that."

"Then he's in for a fright when he discovers who you are."

"I suppose so. Yes, I suppose Darien-Gore is bound to tell him."

"Hadn't *you* better warn Darien-Gore—I mean, that he's sheltering somebody who may be after the family jewels?"

"Perhaps so." Appleby frowned. "Only, it might n't be altogether tactful. You see, Mr. Jolly's line happens to be blackmail."

"How revolting! But surely—"

"I think," Appleby said, "we go up this staircase to reach the long gallery."

"One moment, my lady, if you please." Frape had stepped forward rather dramatically out of shadow. "You would find it safer to come up by the staircase at the other end of the gallery."

"You mean that this one may tumble down?" Judith looked in some alarm behind her. It had been a stiff climb.

"Nothing of that kind, my lady. But to enter the gallery by this door—"

Frape broke off as a sharp twang made itself heard from the direction in which he was pointing.

"That would be Mr. Robert," he said. "Or it might be Mr. Charles Trevor. Both draw a powerful bow—if that indeed be the correct expression among archers . . . Ah!" The twang had made itself heard again.

"I think I see what you mean," Appleby said. "It wouldn't be healthy to get in the way of *that*."

"Precisely, sir. But in a moment the round—if they call it that—will be over. You and her ladyship can then enter. Meanwhile, sir, may I ask if you have seen anything of Mr. Jolly?"

"Yes—and I imagine he's coming 'along.'"

"I am glad to hear it, sir. It had occurred to me that he might be lingering awkwardly in his room."

Frape turned to Judith. It was clear that he regarded her as worthier of the august confidence of an upper servant than was her husband.

"To my mind," Frape murmured, "an error of judgment on Mr. Robert's part. Persons are best accommodated according to their evident station. Mr. Jolly would have done very well in the servant's hall. And I could have answered for it that there would have been no complaints."

"I'm sure there wouldn't," Judith said.

"Precisely, my lady. My own service has always been in large establishments and among the old gentry. In such circumstances one becomes accustomed to entertaining odd visitors from time to time. Even chauffeurs are occasionally odd. And lady's maids, I am sorry to say, are becoming increasingly so—as your ladyship is doubtless aware."

"I haven't had one since I came out. So I wouldn't know." Judith

spoke with a briskness that doubtless characterized Appleby thought, the old gentry rather than the new. But now, from beyond the door over which the communicative Frape stood guard, there came a small sound as of polite applause. "They must have finished the end."

"The end, my lady?"

"It's called an end, Mr. Frape, not a round."

Appleby, who would have addressed Frape as Frape, and who knew nothing about ends, felt that Judith had smartly scored two points at once.

"In other words," he said, "we can safely go in."

"Exactly so, sir." And Frape, with a grave bow, opened the door of the long gallery.

"As you'll notice, we manage fifty yards—which is quite a regular ladies' length. And there's plenty of height, as you see."

Prunella Darien-Gore was explaining this to Judith—and with a shade of desperation, Appleby thought. Her husband, who ought to have been giving these explanations, seemed to be sunk in a somber reverie.

"Mr. Trevor, will you be good enough to show Lady Appleby?"

"Yes, of course." Charles Trevor was stout and flabby; one would have guessed that he was without either interest or skill in athletic pursuits. But now he slip-

ped on brace and tips, and with a casual certainty sent one arrow into the gold and two into the red.

"Robert?" he said challengingly.

Robert Darien-Gore came out of his abstraction with a start, and picked up his own bow without a word. Appleby, standing beside Robert's wife, was aware of a curious tension in her as she watched. He spoke out of an impulse to relieve this tension in some way.

"I know nothing about archery," Appleby said. "But it's my guess that your husband is pretty good?"

"He used to be." Prunella, Appleby saw, was digging her nails hard into the palms of her hands. "It came second only to his rock and mountain climbing."

She gave a suppressed gasp, as if suddenly aware that she was thinking of her husband as somebody out of the past.

"Yes," she said. "Robert is first-class. Watch."

Her sudden faith in her husband was justified. Robert shot three arrows and bettered Trevor's score. Into his final shot he appeared to have put unnecessary force. The shaft had buried itself deep in the heart of the target and it would take exceptional strength to pull the arrow out.

In the middle ages, Appleby remembered, an arrow from an

English longbow could pierce the thickest armor. And there was something alarming in this one: its feathered tip was still quivering as Appleby watched.

"Capital, my dear Robert!" General Strickland, who had been talking to Jasper Darien-Gore in a corner, set down a glass in order to applaud vigorously. "Let's see if Trevor can beat that—eh? Just let me retrieve the things."

He turned to Appleby. "We don't manage two ends, you see. It would lose us five yards we can't spare. So we shoot only from this end. Nobody do anything careless, please!"

The General hurried off down the length of the gallery.

"Ned isn't in Robert's class," Mrs. Strickland said to Judith. "Nor in this Mr. Trevor's either. But he can give Jasper a good match. I'm very much afraid he may want to now. Aren't you famished, Judith?"

"Quite famished. I suppose we're waiting for Mr. Jolly."

"Mr. Jolly—whoever is he?"

"The other gate crasher. He seems to have made the haven of Gore Castle about an hour before John and I did."

"How very odd. I hope he isn't keen on archery too. I find it tedious—and a little unnerving."

"Unnerving, Dorcas? I suppose it has a lethal background—or history. But—unnerving?"

"I think it's that terrible twang—like something going wrong with a piano string. But here they go again."

General Strickland had retrieved the arrows, and now Charles Trevor was again addressing himself to the target. He sent his first arrow into the gold.

"There!" Mrs. Strickland said. "Didn't you hear? Like something happening to the poor old family Bechstein—or perhaps to one's granddaughter's cello—in the middle of the night. Have you never been wakened up by just that?"

"I have." Appleby, who had been accepting a drink from Frape, paused beside her. "But, you know—"

"Stop!"

It was the vigilant Frape who had given this shout. And he was only just in time. As Trevor drew back the bowstring, the door at the farther end of the gallery had opened, and Jolly had walked in. Not unnaturally, he stood transfixed, staring up the gallery at Trevor.

And for an alarming moment Trevor himself swayed oddly, and with a queer, and involuntary movement seemed almost to train his arrow on the newcomer. Then he let his bow gently unflex.

There was a moment or two of mild confusion, followed by introductions. These last were not without awkwardness. Jolly seem-

ed indisposed to make any claim upon the social graces. He gave each of the women in turn what was no doubt meant to be a bow, but had more the appearance of a wary cringe.

His glance tended to go apprehensively toward Trevor—as it still well might—and then travel furtively toward Robert. Frape stood in the background. It was evident that the proceedings were very far from enjoying his approval.

"Lady Appleby," Jasper was saying. "And Sir John Appleby. Sir John is—"

"How do you do?" Without too great an effect of abruptness, Appleby had cut explanations short. "We're in the same boat, you and I. My car got stranded behind yours. Was it just the snow that held you up, or did you have engine trouble?"

"A little bit of one thing, and a little bit of another." Jolly, whose speech was no more polished than his manner, eyed Appleby narrowly. "Acquainted with these people here, are you?" he asked.

"I happen to know General Strickland and his wife. But not the others."

"I'm a stranger here myself. They invited me to stay the night. Affable, you might say. Not that they could well do anything else. Plenty of room in a place like this."

"Clearly there is." "And no need to stint, either. Money in a big way, eh? And a touch of real class as well. I've a fancy for that. High aristocratic feeling. Sense of honor and so on."

Jolly gestured at the line of family portraits which hung in the long gallery. "Eyes of one's ancestors upon one, eh? There's something I like about that."

"No doubt you find it professionally advantageous. By the way, I gather you've met Mr. Trevor before?"

"Trevor?" Jolly was startled. "Who is he? Never heard of him."

"He's the man who was about to shoot when you came into the gallery. I got the impression that you were looking at each other with some kind of recognition."

"Nothing of the kind. What I recognized was that he very nearly killed me."

"I don't know that he did quite that. But it was an awkward moment, certainly. It was natural that he should be agitated—that he should be a little agitated. I think I must go and have a word with him."

"Does one require a license," Appleby asked casually, "to play around with bows and arrows?"

"Good Lord, no!" Charles Trevor glanced at Appleby in surprise—and also, perhaps, with a faint impression of quick alarm.

"Why ever should one?"

"It has occurred to me that the things are just as efficient weapons as pistols and revolvers—more efficient than some. I've seen that you can put an arrow through the pinhole—isn't it called?—on that target. I doubt whether you could do the same with an automatic."

"I've never handled a pistol in my life, so that's no doubt true."

"Ah! Now, suppose that incident a few minutes ago had really resulted in an accident. Suppose you'd fired—or does one say shot?—dead at this fellow Jolly. You'd actually have transfixed him, wouldn't you?"

"Really, my dear sir! I don't know that it's very pleasant to—"

"He'd have been pinned to the wall, like a living butterfly that some cruel child—"

"Dash it all—" Not unreasonably, Trevor seemed outraged by this macabre before dinner chat.

"I was only thinking, you know, that if one had sufficient cause really to hate a man, an arrow might be a more attractive weapon than a bullet. But you must forgive me; I'm a policeman, remember. My mind runs on these matters from time to time. And—do you know?—I can almost imagine that some people would hate Mr. Jolly—quite a lot. I'd say he's a type one rather likes to forget about. Supposing when one had forgotten him—"

"I care nothing about this fellow Jolly. And I certainly don't think he's worth discussing."

"I was going to say that when the Jollys of this life do bob up again, the desirable thing is probably to keep one's head. As for talking about him—well, he's at least not a very conversable character himself. Look at him now."

Jasper and General Strickland were competing against each other, though in rather a casual way. The others were engaged in desultory conversation behind them. Jolly, however, had retired to a window seat at the side of the gallery. And he began, as Appleby looked, to fumble in a pocket. He might have been hunting for a cigarette case or for matches. But what he brought out was a dark, bulky pocketbook.

The pocketbook was already familiar to Appleby. He had seen it, through that open bedroom door, going into Jolly's pocket earlier in the evening. Having produced it, Jolly did nothing more. He simply sat immobile, with the pocketbook in his lap.

Appleby turned back to the others. He was just in time to catch a swift impression of the Darien-Gore brothers, momentarily immobile, gazing into each other's eyes.

Then Jasper drew back his bowstring, and there followed the twang to which Dorcas Strickland

took such exception. The shaft flew wide. There was a moment's silence in the gallery. It was broken by Frape:

"Dinner is served!"

"I shall be delighted to have coffee in the gallery," Mrs. Strickland said as she re-entered it. "I don't know a more charming room. But I make one condition—that those tiresome bows and arrows be put away. Judith, don't you agree?"

"I think I do. If the men find more talk with us boring, they can go away and play billiards."

"Prunella, dear, you are the hostess." Mrs. Strickland spoke a shade sharply. "The onus is on you."

"But of course!" Robert's wife had walked into the room absent-mindedly. Now she turned round with a start. "Only you needn't be anxious, Dorcas. There's never any archery after dinner. Jasper would as soon think to settle down to talk about money. Everything has been put in the ascham."

"The what, dear?" The three women were alone, and Mrs. Strickland was pouring coffee.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Prunella had again started out of inattention. "The ascham is the name given to the cupboard where bows and things are kept. There it is."

She indicated a tall and beautiful piece of furniture,

perhaps Elizabethan in period, which stood against the wall. "I think it must be named after some famous archer."

"Roger Ascham," Judith said, a shade instructively. "He wrote a book called *Toxophilus*. He was a schoolmaster."

"I am sure he was an excessively dreary person." Mrs. Strickland was studying a row of bottles. "Why, in bachelor establishments, are women of unblemished reputation invariably confronted with Crème de Menthe? Never mind. There's a perfectly respectable brandy too."

"I am sure there is." Prunella spoke rather drily. "And won't you have a cigar?"

"Only at home, dear. That has always been my rule."

Judith, too, found herself some brandy. So far, the evening had not been a success, and it appeared unlikely that it would perk up now. Dinner, indeed, had been so constrained an affair that the tactful thing would probably be an acknowledgement of the fact, made on a whimsical note.

"John and I did our best," she said. "But we were foreign bodies, I suppose. It all didn't seem to mix terribly well."

"One must blame that really somber Mr. Jolly," Mrs. Strickland said. "He disappointed me. One so seldom has an opportunity of meeting that sort of person—unless one goes canvassing at

election time, or something of that kind. But he *quite* refused to be drawn out."

"I'm afraid Robert was rather silent." Prunella was gazing into her untasted cup of coffee. "But he has been depressed ever since he—he resigned his commission. Of course, Jasper is very good—"

"One can see that they are devoted to each other," Judith said.

"Yes—and Jasper wants Robert to take over the running of the estate. I hope he will. It would be so much better than—than simply hanging around."

There was an awkward silence, resolutely broken by Mrs. Strickland.

"Jasper did his best with us—at dinner, I mean. He can talk so well about the history of Gore Castle. Of course, I've heard parts of it before. But he told us some things that were quite new to me. About the ghost that walks in this gallery. I'm sure I never heard of that. Do you think it goes about pierced by an arrow? I wouldn't be at all surprised. And the superstition about the well at midnight—"

"There's a superstition about the well?" Judith asked.

"Yes. Didn't you hear? And I'm quite sure that I wouldn't care—but here are the men. I had a notion they wouldn't linger very long."

"A very good dinner," General Strickland said to Appleby. The two men were sitting in a corner of the gallery apart. "A very good dinner, indeed."

"It might have been a shade more lively, I thought."

"Lively? I don't believe in dinners being lively. Not with a Margaux like that. Chatter spoils one's concentration, if you ask me."

"Margaux, was it? Judith said it tasted rather like cowslip wine."

"My dear boy, she was perfectly right. She always is. That's the precise description for the bouquet of Margaux. Ever been to the chateau?"

Strickland paused to sniff at his brandy, then went on. "I must tell you, one day, of the week I spent there in '17. Absolutely amazing. Not that the place is anything much to look at. Not a patch on Gore. Built by some fellow called Lacolonilla about a hundred years ago, and might be round the corner from my own house in Regent's Park. . . How does Gore Castle strike you, by the way?"

"It's an impressive place—particularly to tumble into out of the snow. And perhaps a shade oppressive, as well."

"Never struck me that way, I must say. But then I've known it, you see, man and boy. . . Bit of a cloud over it at the moment, eh?"

"So, I feel. But Judith and I are unexpected guests, you know. I told her, earlier this evening, that curiosity isn't on the calendar."

"And she said that, with you, it's never off?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, she did." Appleby paused to light a cigar. "But, Strickland—do you know?—I'm not sure I wouldn't like any gossip there is. I've a notion there's something—well, building up. Any idea what I mean?"

General Strickland looked about him cautiously. But the two men were unobserved—except by the ancestral Darien-Gore portraits on the walls.

"That fellow Charles Trevor seems deucedly uneasy," he said. "And what's he doing here, anyway? Knows his spoons and forks, and all that. In fact, he was at school with Jasper. But not our sort. Not our sort, at all."

"I suppose not." Appleby was amused by this blunt social judgment. "But I imagine he's more our sort than Mr. Jolly."

"Well, that's different. Very decent, unassuming chap, no doubt. Some sort of counter jumper or motor salesman, eh? Jasper didn't want to bother the servants with him."

"So I've gathered—if it was Jasper, I rather think it may have been Robert. There's a faint con-

flict of evidence on the point."

"Well, it comes to the same thing, my dear boy. The brothers are tremendously thick. And since Robert and Prunella came to live here—"

"Why did they come?"

"Ah—that's telling."

"I know it is."

"Appleby, you really feel there's something—well, *happening* in this place?"

"Happening, or going to happen. Don't you feel—?"

"That it could be stopped?"

"Well, not by me. I just don't know enough." Appleby paused to look into his brandy glass, "Were you going to tell me about Robert?"

"My dear chap, I don't know. Nobody does—or wants to, I should hope. It looked damably ugly for a time. And then it ended on what you might call a minor note."

"Ended? What ended?"

"Robert's career, I suppose one has to say. He left the army. And the thing was dropped."

"The thing? What thing?"

"God knows, something there turned out not to be sufficient evidence about, I imagine." General Strickland broke off, and again looked about him. This time it was at the line of portraits silent on the wall.

"A poor show of some sort," the General said, "Hard on a decent family, eh? Not much wrong

with them since the Crusades, and all that."

"You're a romantic at heart, Strickland. And *noblesse oblige* is all very well, no doubt." Appleby was speaking seriously. "But that particular sense of obligation is an open invitation to pride."

"And pride?"

"Is an open invitation to the devil." Appleby was still serious.

"Here's Jasper coming down the gallery. He looks proud, I'm bound to admit. But he's aging, too. It's just struck me. Still, he's kept his figure and his strength. A great athlete, you know, as a young man. But not the sort that falls into a flabby middle-age. . . . I think he's coming over to talk to you. I must go and have another word with your wife. Astonishing thing, you two turning up here like that. Quite astonishing."

"Delightful that you know the Stricklands," Jasper Darien-Gore said. "Won't you and your wife treat it as an inducement to stay on for a day or two?"

"It's most hospitable of you, but I'm afraid we can't."

Appleby felt no reason to suppose that Darien-Gore had spoken other than merely by way of civility. There was, indeed, something faintly distraught in his manner which emphasized the point. "As a matter of fact, we must try to get away fairly early."

Appleby hesitated, and then took the plunge. "Unless, that is, I can be useful in any way."

He waited for a response, but none came. Darien-Gore was looking at him with a conventional smile. He mightn't have heard.

Having begun, however, Appleby went on. "You'll forgive me if I'm talking nonsense. But it has just occurred to me that in that fellow Jolly you may find yourself rather far from entertaining an angel unawares. And I happen to know—"

"Jolly?" Darien-Gore repeated, the name vaguely. "An odd chap, I agree. But he has been getting on quite well with Robert. In fact, they've been making some kind of wager—I've no idea about what."

"I don't think I'd be inclined to lay any wager with Jolly. Winning and losing might prove equally expensive."

"And he says that he must try to get away quite early, too. Ah, here he is."

This was not wholly accurate. Jolly had been standing some little way across the gallery, and without showing any disposition to approach. But Jasper had made a gesture which constrained him to come forward.

"Mr. Jolly," he said, "you must really leave us in the morning, if your car can be got away? It would be pleasant if you could stay a little longer."

As he produced this further civility, Jasper gave Appleby a hard smile. "And, of course—" He broke off. "Ah, thank you, Frape."

Frape's appearance was with a large silver tray on which he was carrying round a whiskey decanter, glasses, ice, and a siphon. The Darien-Gores, it was to be supposed, kept fairly early hours. Frape was looking particularly wooden. He had presumably overheard his employer's latest essay in hospitality.

"Very much obliged," Jolly said. "But fast and far will be my motto in the morning. All having gone well, that's to say." He gave a laugh which was at once insolent and apprehensive. "Yes, all having gone well."

Jolly looked indecisively at the tray—and at this moment Robert Darien-Gore came up. Silently he poured a stiff drink, added a splash of soda water, and handed the glass to Jolly.

Jolly, who already seemed slightly drunk, gulped, hesitated, gulped again. The two brothers watched him fixedly. He returned the glass, only half emptied, to the tray, and waved Frape away. Frape's eyes met Appleby's for a moment, and then the butler moved silently off.

"I know just when I've been given enough," Jolly said. "And it has been the secret of my success."

He turned to Appleby; and gave him a look of startling contempt. "Pleasant to meet people one has heard about," he said. "Isn't that right, Sir John?"

"Decidedly. And I'm glad I've been here to meet you tonight."

"I know, you see, just how much I can take." Jolly pointed at Appleby's glass, as if further to explain this remark. "That, and fast and far, are the secrets of my success."

"Come and have a final word with my wife, Mr. Jolly."

Quite firmly Appleby took Jolly by the elbow and led him away—leaving the Darien-Gores looking at each of them silently. But Appleby took no more than a few paces toward Judith.

"My man," he said, "let me give you a word of advice. Stick, on this occasion, to your motto—fast and far. And make it quite clear that you have forgotten the other secret of your success."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about life and death. Good night."

"Good night, madam—good night, sir—good night, my lady." Frape, standing at one of the doors of the long gallery, responded to such salutations as he was offered while the company dispersed. His employer and his employer's brother were the last to leave the gallery; to each of

the Darien-Gores, as he very slightly bowed, he gave a grave, straight look.

Jasper hesitated at the head of the staircase, half turned as if about to speak, then thought better of it and moved on.

Robert had already vanished; in a moment Jasper's shoulders, squarely held, vanished too, and then his head.

Frape closed the door behind him, turned, and looked down the long gallery. From its far end the archery target regarded him like a staring and sleepless eye. He moved down the gallery, set glasses on a tray, placed a screen carefully in front of the great fireplace, turned off the lights, so that it was now by the flicker of firelight that he was lit, paused to look thoughtfully at the line of portraits on the wall.

He went over to the ascham and saw that it was locked. He moved to a window, drew back a curtain and stood immobile before the wintry scene.

Small clouds were drifting across a high, full moon, so that pale light and near-blackness washed alternately over the landscape. To his left, and from very high up, he had an oblique view of the inner bailey; this came into full light for a moment, revealing the well still amid its unbroken carpet of snow.

Frape remained motionless, with the firelight behind him . . .

"Snubbed," Appleby said.

"Never mind, darling. This is a most comfortable bed. And do hurry. I'm extremely sleepy.'" Judith put down the book she had been reading. "You mean you scrapped that business about having a social duty not to discover anything?"

"More or less." Appleby took off his black tie and tossed it on the dressing table. "At least, I decided that I ought to offer our host some sort of warning about Jolly. What I was after was a little candor before trouble blows up."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Unfortunately, I can't make more than a guess at it. If I could do more, it might be possible for me to act. Anyway, our friend Jasper refused to play along. So did Jolly."

"Jolly! You talked to him?"

"He's up to mischief, and I had a shot at scaring him off. It didn't work. You'd take him to be rather an apprehensive little rat, but in fact he has nerve—plenty of nerve. It amuses him to be operating—and he certainly is operating—right under my nose."

"He's gathered who you are?"

"Quite clearly he has. But I don't seem to carry around with me much terror of the law."

"There's something between him and that man Charles Trevor."

"Yes, I think there is." Appleby was now in his pajamas.

"If you ask me, Trevor is quite as nasty as Jolly. Perhaps they're confederates."

"Perhaps."

"You say something's going to happen. What?"

"Well, for one thing, you and I are going to sleep." Appleby turned out a light. "For another—but this is where I'm beginning to guess—there's going to be some hard bargaining here at Gore. And not of a kind, unfortunately, in which I can very well act as honest broker."

"It sounds most unpleasant."

"I'm sure it is. But I don't see that there is anything I can do. I must think twice before compounding a felony, I suppose. And that's why, in a way, I don't really want to learn more. We didn't stagger in here out of the snow in order to start blowing police whistles and insisting on an open scandal. Or that's how I see it at the moment. It may be different in the morning."

Appleby crossed to the window, drew back the curtain a little way, and half opened a casement. He moved back across the room, got into bed, and turned out the last light. The room was quite dark, with only a narrow band of moonlight falling on a wall and across the bed.

"And now you're going straight to sleep," he said.

The band of moonlight had moved a little; it now caught the corner of a picture. Otherwise the room was in absolute darkness. The only sound was Judith's breathing. Then—

*Twang!*

Appleby found that he had come awake with a start, and that his mind was groping for the reason. And the reason came to him, like an echo on the inner ear, as he sat up and switched on a bedside lamp. Judith was still fast asleep.

He picked up his watch and looked at it; the time was just two o'clock. He slipped out of bed, went over to the door, and listened intently. He came back, put on his dressing gown, felt in his open suitcase, and produced a pocket torch.

Returning to the door, he opened it gently, went out, and closed it quietly behind him. The corridor before him was dark and cold. He let the beam from his flashlight first play down its empty length, and then circle until it found the door of Jolly's room. He went over to this, listened for some seconds, and then switched off the torch and cautiously turned the handle of Jolly's door.

The door swung back with a faint creak upon blackness. He switched on the torch again, and the beam fell on Jolly's shabby suitcase, open and untidy. The beam circled the room and fell

on the bed. It had been turned down at one corner. But nobody had slept in it.

Appleby closed the door—and as he did so, he heard faint sounds from the end of the corridor. They might have been slippersed footfalls. He turned in time to see a dim form and a flickering light disappear round a corner. Muffling the torch in the skirt of his dressing gown, Appleby followed.

Under these conditions, Gore Castle seemed tortuous and enormous. Several times Appleby lost all trace of the figure in front of him. And then, suddenly, he oriented himself. The newel by which he was standing belonged to one of the two staircases leading to the long gallery.

He looked up. An unidentifiable male figure—like himself, in a dressing gown, but holding a lighted candle before him—was disappearing into the long gallery itself. Appleby climbed rapidly.

The gallery, when he reached it, was part in near-darkness and part floating in moonlight. At its far end stood the archery target, commanding the long narrow place.

Appleby rounded a screen, and the man with the candle stood before him. It was Frape. His hand was on the door of the ascham.

"What's this all about, Frape?"

The candlestick in Frape's hand jumped. But when he turned

round it was to look at Appleby steadily enough.

"The door of the ascham, sir. It seems to have been left unsecured, and to have been banging in the night. The fault is mine, sir. I am deeply sorry that you, too, should have been disturbed by it."

"Nonsense."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You are talking nonsense, Frape, as you very well know."

"I assure you, sir—"

"Open the door of the thing and let's have a look. It's no more than you were going to do for yourself."

Silently Frape turned back and opened the door of the tall cupboard.

"Commendable," Appleby said: "Everything as accountable as in a well-ordered armory. Those two empty places in the rack, Frape—I think they mean two arrows missing?"

"It might be so, sir. I cannot tell."

"Two gone." Appleby lifted a third arrow from the rack and poised it in his hand. "Simply as a dagger," he said, "it would make a pretty lethal weapon—would it not?"

"I really can't say, sir."

"But there's a bow missing as well?"

"There may be, sir. I have never counted them, so am not in a position to say."

"Frape, drop this. It can do nobody any good. You came up here—didn't you?—because you were disturbed by the same sound that disturbed me. Somebody was shooting one of those damned things. And we both know that nobody practices archery in the small hours just for fun."

"There is the possibility of a bet, sir. Gentlemen have their peculiar ways."

"For heaven's sake, man, stop behaving like a stage butler. You know, even better than I do, that there's some deviltry afoot in this place."

"Yes...yes, I do." Frape passed a hand over his forehead, like a man who gives up. "Only, I must—"

At this moment the creak of a door being opened made itself heard from the far end of the gallery. Appleby was about to turn toward the noise when Frape restrained him.

"Don't turn round," Frape said in a low voice. "I can see without being detected. . . I think somebody is watching us through the door."

He began to fiddle with the door handle of the ascham. "Yes," he said in a louder tone. "The catch is defective, sir; and so the door has simply been blowing to and fro. There is always a draft in the gallery."

Once more Frape lowered his voice. "He's opened it wider. It's

Mr. Trevor. He's shut it again. Now he's gone."

"You mean to say"—now Appleby did turn round—"that this fellow Trevor has come up here, peered in at us in a furtive manner, and made himself scarce again?"

"Yes, sir. And it is certainly another indication that things are not as they ought to be."

"Quite so. And the question is, where do we go from here? Have you any idea where we might find that fellow Jolly?"

"In his bed, I suppose."

"Jolly's bed hasn't been slept in. Were you aware of any coming and going about the place after the company broke up last night?"

"I have an impression, sir, that there was some talk going on in the library until about midnight. Whether Mr. Jolly was concerned, I don't know. But would I be correct in assuming that you are aware of something seriously to Jolly's discredit?"

"That puts it mildly, Frape. The man's a professional criminal."

"Then I suggest that he may have left the Castle. Mr. Darien-Gore may have caught him in some design that has resulted in Jolly's beating a hasty retreat. It would be perfectly possible. The wind has dropped, and I think there has been no more snow."

As he said this, and as if to confirm his impression, Frape

crossed over to a window.

"It's a possibility, certainly," Appleby said. "And I wonder—"

"Sir"—Frape's voice had changed suddenly—"will you be so good as to step this way?"

Appleby did so, and found himself looking obliquely down into the moonlit inner courtyard. It was a moment before he realized the small change that had taken place in the bailey.

Between the well and one side of the surrounding courtyard there was now a line of tracks in the snow.

"Mr. Darien-Gore's binoculars, sir. He keeps a pair in the gallery."

Appleby took the binoculars and focused. There could be no doubt about what he saw. A simple line of heavy footprints led straight to the well.

And there were no footprints leaving the well.

"Ought I to rouse Mr. Darien-Gore, sir?" Frape asked, as Appleby put down the binoculars and turned away from the window.

"Certainly you must." Appleby moved across the gallery to the great fireplace. "And everybody else as well. But it will be rather a chilly occasion for them, particularly for the ladies. Would you say, Frape, that this fire could be blown up quickly?"

"Decidedly, sir. A little work with the bellows will produce a

blaze in just a few minutes."

"Then this will be the best place in which to meet. You had better get on to the job . . . But one moment." Appleby held up a hand. "You could not have been mistaken about the identity of the man peering in on us a few moments ago?"

"Certainly not. It was Mr. Trevor."

"Nor could you have had any motive for deceiving me in the matter?"

"I quite fail to understand you, sir."

Appleby shrugged. "Do you think Mr. Trevor might still be outside that door, hoping that we shall leave by the other one?"

"I can't imagine any reason for such a thing."

"Can't you? Well, I propose to put it to the test—by going down the one staircase, through the hall, and up the other one now. You will stay here, please, and blow up the fire."

"I don't see that—"

"Frapé, you're far from being in the dark about what we're up against. Please do as I say."

This time Appleby waited for no reply, but left the gallery by the door beside the target, and ran downstairs, playing his torch before him. As an outflanking move it seemed a forlorn hope, but in fact it was startlingly successful.

When, a couple of minutes

later, he returned breathlessly into the gallery by the other door, he was hustling ahead of him a figure who had in fact still been lurking there.

But it wasn't Charles Trevor. It was Robert Darien-Gore.

"All right, Frapé," Appleby said. "Get everybody in here. But give them a few minutes to get dressed—and get dressed yourself."

He turned to Robert, who was wearing knickerbockers and a shooting jacket. "You mustn't mind my staying as I am," Appleby said. "It might be a mistake if you and I wasted any time in beginning to work this thing out."

"Good God!" General Strickland said, and put down the binoculars. He was the last of the company to have accepted Appleby's invitation to scrutinize the inner bailey. "The fellow walked deliberately out to the well and killed himself. And in that hideous way."

"It isn't," Mrs. Strickland asked, "some—some abominable joke? He can't, for instance, have tiptoed back again in his own prints in the snow?"

"I'm afraid not." Appleby, who was planted before what was now a brisk fire, shook his head. "Robert Darien-Gore was good enough to accompany me down to the inner bailey a few minutes

ago. We didn't go right out to the well—I want those tracks photographed before any others are made; but I satisfied myself—professionally, if I may so express it—that nobody can have come back through that snow. Whatever the tracks tell, they don't tell that."

"The snow on the parapet," Trevor said rather hoarsely, "on the low wall, I mean, round the well—seems to have prints at one point too."

"Precisely. And the picture seems very clear. There is one person, and one person only, who is missing from Gore Castle now—an unexpected guest, like myself: the man Jolly. Whether deliberately or by accident, he has gone down the well. And I believe you all know what *that* means."

"By accident?" Strickland asked. "How could it have been an accident?"

"I can't see how it could possibly be," Judith Appleby said. "No sane man would take it into his head to go out in the middle of the night—"

"He was a bit tight," Jasper Darien-Gore said. "I don't know if that's relevant, but it's a fact. Frape, you noticed it?"

"Most emphatically, sir. Although not incapacitated, the man was undoubtedly tipsy."

"He must have decided to go back to his car," Prunella Darien-Gore broke in. "He thought he'd

got outside the castle, and he went blundering through the snow—"

"It's not impossible," Appleby said. "Only it doesn't account for Jolly's *climbing up on the lip of the well*. Face up to that fact, and suicide is the only explanation—or would seem to be. But Mr. Robert has another theory. You may judge it bizarre, but it does fit the facts. Frape, do you remember saying something to me about a bet?"

"Yes, sir. It was in a slightly different connection. But the point is a very relevant one, if I may say so, sir."

"And I think you remarked that gentlemen have their 'peculiar' ways?"

"I did, sir. I trust the observation was not impertinent."

"According to Mr. Robert, Mr. Jasper Darien-Gore himself happened to recount at the dinner table some legend or superstition about the well. It was to the effect that notable good luck will be won by any man who makes his way to the well at midnight, stands on its wall, and invokes the moon."

"Does *what*?" General Strickland exclaimed. "Some pagan nonsense, eh? God bless my soul!"

"It's perfectly true," Jasper spoke slowly. "I did spin that old yarn. And I can imagine some young man—a subaltern or undergraduate, for instance—who

might have taken it as a dare. But not that fellow Jolly. He wasn't the type. It doesn't make sense."

"Unfortunately, something further happened." Appleby still stood in front of the fireplace; he might almost have been on guard before it. "Mr. Robert—so he tells me—made some sort of wager with Jolly. Or perhaps he did no more than vaguely suggest a wager. He was trying, as I understand the matter, to entertain the man—who was not altogether in his element among us. Have I got it right, Mr. Robert?"

Most of the company were standing or sitting in a wide circle round Appleby. But Robert had sat down a little apart. He might have been assuming, quite consciously, an isolated and alienated pose—rather suggestive of young Hamlet at the court of his uncle Claudius. He had remained silent so far, but now he replied to Appleby's challenge.

"Yes," he said. "Just that. I said something about a bottle of Jasper's Margaux if Jolly could tell me in the morning that he had done this stupid and foolhardy thing. I repent it bitterly now. In fact, I hold myself responsible for the man's death."

"Come, come," General Strickland said kindly. "That's a morbid view, my dear Robert. You were doing your best to entertain the fellow, and what has

happened couldn't be foreseen."

"It isn't the truth! It can't be!" Prunella had sprung to her feet in some ungovernable agitation. "He still wasn't that sort of man. He was calculating, cold. I hated him."

She turned to her husband. "Robert, you're not hiding something, shielding somebody?"

"Prunella, for God's sake control yourself." Robert made what was almost a weary gesture. "It's a queer story, I know. But there it is."

"Which puts the matter in a nutshell."

Appleby had taken a single step forward, and the effect was to make him dominate the people in the long gallery.

"It's a queer story," Appleby continued, "but it's conceivable. And there isn't any other in the field. Not unless we have a few more facts. But as it happens, we *have* more facts. The first of them is a bow shot in the night. Strickland, would you mind stepping through that door at the end of the gallery and bringing in anything you find hidden behind it?"

General Strickland did as he was asked, and came back carrying a bow.

"It's a bow," he said, a shade obviously. "And there's an arrow there too."

"Precisely. And somebody was deeply concerned to return them

to the ascham here within the last hour. Frape is convinced that person was Mr. Trevor. So perhaps Mr. Trevor somehow lured Jolly up on the lip of the well, and then—so to speak—shot him into it. One moment!"

Appleby stopped Trevor on the verge of some outburst. "Another fact is this: Jolly was, to my positive knowledge, a professional blackmailer. And his arrival here wasn't fortuitous—it was by design. Moreover—but this is conjecture rather than fact—he and Mr. Trevor were not entirely unknown to each other—"

"That's true." Charles Trevor was a very frightened man. "I had an—an encounter with Jolly in the past. Suddenly coming upon him, here was a great shock. But it wasn't—"

"Very well. Suppose Frape didn't see Mr. Trevor peering through that door. Suppose Frape wanted to shield—"

"Of course Frape saw me. And then you discovered me. And now Strickland has found the bow and arrow." Robert Darien-Gore got these statements out in a series of gasps. "I haven't been sleeping. Last night I knew it wasn't even worthwhile going to bed. So I passed the time repairing one of the horns of that bow, and feathering an arrow. Then I brought them back here."

Looking round the company, Robert met absolute silence. "I

give you all my word of honor as a gentleman," he said, "that I did not shoot Jolly with an arrow."

There was another long silence, broken only by an inarticulate sound from Prunella.

"We can accept that," Appleby said gently. "But you did kill him, all the same."

"Jolly came to Gore Castle in the way of trade," Appleby said. "His own filthy trade. He had papers he was going to sell—at a price. I don't know what story those papers tell. But it is the story that failed to see the light of day when Robert Darien-Gore was forced to leave the army. Jolly, I may say, made a sinister joke to me. He said he knew when he'd been given enough; he knew just how much he could take. He was wrong."

"This must stop." Jasper Darien-Gore spoke with an assumption of authority. "If there is a case for the police to investigate, then the local police must be summoned in the regular way. Sir John, I consider that you have no official standing—"

"You are quite wrong, sir." Appleby looked sternly at his host. "I am the holder of a warrant card, like any other officer of the police. And on its authority I propose to make an arrest on a specific charge. Now, may I go on?"

"For God's sake do!" Pruhella cried out. "I can't stand any more of this—I can't stand it!"

"My dear," Mrs. Strickland said and went to sit beside her.

"Strickland, take the binoculars again, will you? Look at the keep. Got it? What strikes you about it?"

"Chiefly, all the scaffolding round it, I'd say."

"Windows?"

"There are narrow windows all the way up—lighting a spiral staircase, I seem to remember."

"Glazed?"

"No—no panes of glass at all."

"Imagine a skilled archer above ground level on the near side of the bailey. Could he shoot an arrow through one of those open windows?"

"I suppose he could. First shot, if he was a first-class archer."

"And on a flight that would pass directly over the well?"

"Certainly."

"That was what happened. That was the bow-shot I heard and Frapé heard—the twang. The arrow carried with it a line—by means of which somebody waiting in the keep could draw a strong nylon cord across the bailey, a little more than head high above the well."

Appleby turned to Robert. "You had already killed Jolly—simply with an arrow used as a dagger, I think. He was a meagre little man. You carried

the body to the well—the single line of heavy footprints in the snow was yours; you pitched the body in, mounted the lip—and returned across the bailey, hand over hand, on the strong nylon cord. For an experienced mountain climber it wasn't difficult."

"Then the nylon cord was released at the other end, swung like a skipping rope until it fell near one of the flanking walls, and pulled gently, very gently, back across the snow. There will be virtually no trace of it's passage. It only remained to return the bow to the asham here—the bow and one arrow. The second missing arrow is—in Jolly."

"You know too much." Robert Darien-Gore had been sitting hunched in a chair, his right hand deep in the pocket of his shooting jacket. Now he sprang to his feet, brought out his hand, and hurled something in the direction of Appleby—something which flew past him and into the fireplace.

Then the hand went back again and came out holding something else. The crack of a pistol shot reverberated in the gallery as Robert crashed to the floor.

"By God, he's dead!" Like a flash, Jasper had been on his knees beside his brother. But now he rose, dazed and staggering—and with the pistol in his hands. He came slowly over to Appleby.

"I think," he said, "my brother is—dead. Will you—see?"

Appleby took a couple of steps forward—and as he did so Jasper dived behind him. What Robert had hurled into the fireplace was Jolly's pocketbook; it had missed the fire, and lay undamaged.

Jasper grabbed it just as Appleby turned, and started to thrust it into the heart of the flame. Appleby knocked his arm up, and the pocketbook went flying across the gallery. Jasper eluded Appleby's grasp, vaulted a settee with the effortlessness of a young athlete in training, retrieved the pocketbook, and turned round to face the company. He still had Robert's pistol in his hand.

"Don't move," he said. "Don't any of you move."

"This is foolish," Appleby said quietly. "Foolish and useless. Your brother is indeed dead. And his last day's work has been to involve you in murder. You knew nothing about Jolly when he arrived—except that you distrusted him as a guest, and by dinnertime Robert had persuaded you to join him in his plot.

"Your own first part in it was to concoct that legend about the well. But your main part was to be in the keep when the arrow arrived, and later, when Robert had returned by the cord without leaving return footprints, to release the line. You now face a charge of murder, just as your

brother would have faced one. Nothing is to be gained by waving that pistol."

"All of you get back from that fire—now." With pistol raised, Jasper took a step toward Appleby. In his other hand he raised the pocketbook. "What I hold here, I burn—and no one will stop me. After that, we can talk."

"I'm sorry, Darien-Gore, but it won't do. Before you burn those papers, you'll have to shoot a policeman in the performance of his duty. And if—"

"Permit me, sir." Frape had stepped forward. He walked past Appleby and advanced on his employer. "It will be best, sir, that you give me the gun."

"Stand back, or I shoot!"

"As Sir John says, sir, it won't do. So, with great respect, I must insist."

And Frape put out a steady arm and took the pistol from his employer's hand. "Thank you, sir. I am obliged to you."

For a fraction of a second Jasper looked merely bewildered. Then, as Appleby again advanced on him, he turned and ran from the gallery.

"Frape, help me get him!" Instinctively, Appleby addressed first the man who had proved himself in a crisis. He was already running down the gallery as he called over his shoulder: "Strickland, Trevor—he must be stopped!"

The chase through Gore Castle took place in the first light of a bleak winter dawn. Judith Appleby, who had followed the men, was to remember it as a confusion of running and shouting, with ill-identified figures vanishing down vistas that were composed sometimes of stately rooms in unending sequence, sometimes of narrow defiles through forbidding medieval masonry.

It was the kind of pursuit that may happen in nightmare: in one instant hopelessly at fault, and in the next an all but triumphant breathing down the hunted man's neck.

Then they were in the open, plunging and kicking through snow. Suddenly, in front of Jasper as he rounded a corner, there seemed to be only a high blank wall. But he ran straight at it; a buttress appeared; in the angle of this stood a ladder, steeply pitched.

Appleby and Frapé were at its foot seconds after Jasper's heels had vanished upward; but even as they were about to mount it, the ladder came down past their heads. As they struggled to set it up again, Judith could see that Jasper, with a brief respite won, was crouched down on a narrow ledge and fumbling in a pocket.

With trembling hands Jasper produced a box of matches—and then Jolly's fatal pocketbook. From this he pulled out a sheet

of paper, crumpled it, and struck a match. But the match—and then a second and a third—went out.

By now the ladder was in place again. There was no time for another attempt at burning the paper. Clutching the pocketbook, Jasper rose and ran on. He vanished through a low archway, and reached the keep.

It was almost dark inside. Judith was now abreast of her husband. As they paused to accustom themselves to the gloom, Jasper's voice came from the tower above.

"Are you there, Appleby? I don't advise the climb."

"Darien-Gore, come down—in the name of the law!"

"This is my keep, Appleby. It was to defy the law—didn't I tell you?—that my ancestors built it long ago."

The last words were almost inaudible, for Jasper was climbing again. They followed. Perpendicular slits of light spiraled downward and past them as they pantied up the winding stair.

Then, quite suddenly, there was open sky in front of them, and against it they saw Jasper's figure in silhouette. In front of him was a crisscross of scaffolding. One aspect of it they had already seen from other angles—a wooden plank, thrusting out into vacancy for some feet, and startlingly suggestive of a springboard. Beyond it the eye could only travel dizzily

down—to the inner bailey, the well, the single set of prints across the snow.

Jasper turned for a moment. They could see his features dimly, and then—very clearly—that he was holding up the pocketbook to them in a gesture of defiance. He thrust it into his pocket, turned away, measured his distance, and ran. It was not a jump; it was the sort of dive that earns a high score in a swimming meet.

In a beautiful curve Jasper Darien-Gore rose, pivoted in air, plunged, diminished in free fall, and vanished—as they ceased being able to look—vanished into the well.

And from behind them came the breathless voice of General Strickland.

"Good God, Appleby! Jasper didn't better than one when he won a gold medal for England in the '36 Olympics."



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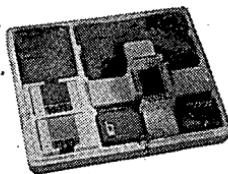
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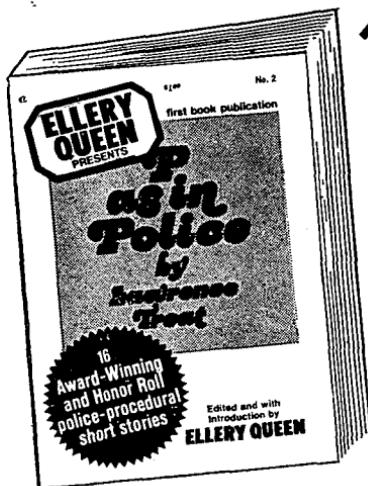
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